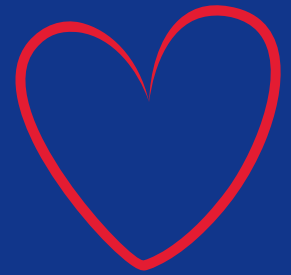


# THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS



ISSUE 3 DECEMBER 2023



SHORT  
STORIES

DEVOTIONS

ARTICLES

POEMS

*Your chance to relax  
and find hope, joy, and peace this Christmas.*



*Merry Christmas!*

# THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS



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# CONTENTS



## **5 IT LOOKS LIKE CHRISTMAS**

*BY JUDI SCHERKENBACH*

The first Christmas looked much different than today's version.

## **7 AN INFLATION-PROOF CHRISTMAS**

*BY CAMERON EDWARDS*

How can we get past the anxiety of our circumstances to find peace?

## **9 WAITING...**

*BY ELIZABETH DAGHFAL*

A retelling of Luke 1 from the perspective of Elisabeth, wife of the priest.

## **13 UNWRAP GOD'S GIFTS**

*BY KAREN R. LUEDERS*

Enjoy God's good gifts!

## **15 CHRISTMAS COOKIES**

*BY LINDA CARTER*

Tips for sharing good cheer in your neighborhood.

## **17 ELIZABETH'S FAMILY FAVORITE GINGERBREAD COOKIE RECIPE**

*BY ELIZABETH DAGHFAL*

## **18 BUDGET YOUR BLESSINGS**

*BY KRISANN BLAIR*

Tips to keep holiday spending in check and focus on the true meaning of Christmas.

# CONTENTS



## **21 A HEART FOR CHRISTMAS**

*BY LAURIE HERLICH*

FICTION. How will God answer her Christmas prayer?

## **25 HAVE YOU HELD MARY'S BABY?**

*BY LYNN U. WATSON*

May the shepherds inspire you to see and know Jesus more this year.

## **29 ONE TINY KING**

*BY CINDY LESCARBEAU*

A poetic look at Jesus' birth.

## **31 WELCOME HOME, OTIS BROWN**

*BY RUTH SCHMECKPEPER*

FICTION. Can Otis find peace in the presence of God this Christmas?

## **34 CONTEMPORARY CHRISTMAS SONGS THAT WILL TOUCH YOUR HEART**

*BY VARIOUS ARTISTS*

Don't miss these meaningful new(er) Christmas carols.

## **35 CHRISTMAS LIGHTS THAT LAST**

*BY SUSAN L. FINK*

A great reminder of the value of light in God's eyes.

## **37 A CHRISTMAS MIRACLE**

*BY LEONE BYRON*

FICTION. Kathy needs a Christmas miracle. Will it come in time?

## **41 GRIEVING AT THE HOLIDAYS**

*BY KRISTINE ORKIN*

Tips for those in grief and those who love them.

## **45 COMMUNITY CHRISTMAS GIFT**

*BY PAMELA BAKER*

FICTION. Can a community Christmas gift break through the hardness of Doreen's heart?

## **50 CHRISTMAS PRAYER**

*ANONYMOUS*

Traditional third verse of "Away in a Manger"

# It Looks Like Christmas

by Judi Scherkenbach



This time of year, a popular song is often played that reminds us, “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.” What does Christmas look like?

In America, the most eye-catching are the decorations. As you look, all around are strings of lights, candy canes, and velvet bows in bright and merry colors of the holiday season, giving a warm glow to homes and workplaces. Very obvious also is the hustle and bustle of the holiday shoppers with arms full of bags and packages.

The sights and sounds of the first Christmas, however, were totally different. Rather than the throng of busy shoppers, there was the shuffle and shove of weary travelers trying to wedge themselves into a small village, swelled many times over its usual population. This was not a holiday of over-the-river-and-through-the-woods-to-Grandmother’s-house-we-go crowd, but a forced influx of taxpayers having to report in at the “county seat” of Bethlehem. Instead of caroling, the streets would have been filled with the sounds of grumbling about the imperial order for a census, plus the comparing of notes about the hardships of the many miles of travel necessary to get there.

Amongst the throng of people were a young man and woman, looking like any other couple, moving from inn to inn to find a room. Perhaps, if anyone would have taken the time, they might have noticed that besides being weary, this couple was about to become parents. As a room could not be found, any shelter unfortunately would have to do.

The solution offered no brightly colored lights or velvet bows, only straw as protection from the bare ground. Rather than being wished a cheery “Happy Holidays,” Mary and Joseph would have heard the snort of a horse or the bellow of a cow.

There was only one package to arrive that night, a special tiny babe, Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes. He was not left under a tree, but laid gently in a manger. This was his birthday but, amidst the trudging crowds, the only other people to take notice were shepherds from nearby fields. They were the first to see the true meaning of what Christmas looked like!

The Bible tells us, "When they had seen Him (Baby Jesus), they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds." Luke 2:17-18, NIV.

The look of Christmas for us today should reveal our faith in God and his promised Son, Jesus.



For over eighteen years Judi Scherkenbach published a weekly inspirational column in small town newspapers retiring in 2020. She has self-published a small volume on hymn history as an apologetic demonstrating America to be a Christian nation from its roots. Other self-published books are two compilations of her newspaper columns, entitled "Familiarity Breeds Contemplation."

Judi was a speaker for Christian women's groups and, before retiring from the speaker circuit, spoke in many Wisconsin communities. She participates in the Eureka Celebration Women's Group.

Judi is the mother of four, grandmother of seven, and great-grandmother of three. As a free-lance writer, Judi is a member of the Word & Pen Writer's Group in Neenah-Menasha and the Greenfield Public Library Writers Group.



# AN INFLATION-PROOF CHRISTMAS

BY CAMERON EDWARDS



And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” Luke 2:10-14, ESV.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” Isaiah 9:6, ESV.

Has inflation put a damper on your enthusiasm for Christmas shopping this year? You aren't the only one.

After so many years of having everything we want for Christmas at our fingertips, the idea of paying more and getting less has many people worried.

*Should I get that new computer for my son? What if my daughter won't be able to have the new phone she put on her list? What if our Christmas tree doesn't have as many presents underneath as we've had in the past? My Christmas will be ruined if I can't find the perfect gift.*

Stress, anxiety, fear, and anger soon occupy shelf space that our hearts once filled with joy and peace.

Isn't Christmas supposed to bring these in abundance?

## **The Arrival of Joy**

Thankfully, joy and peace aren't subject to the fluctuations of our changing economy. They came to stay on the first Christmas.

Here's how it happened:

An angel interrupted the Bethlehem Late Night Show as a group of local shepherds worked the evening shift. His sudden appearance nearly scared them to death.

A few of the men might have tickled their ears with blades of grass to make sure they hadn't been dreaming. This was no dream. The angel was very real and very present.

And he had an all-points bulletin for them.

A Savior — their Savior — had been born in a nearby barn. Joy had come to the world, and He was wearing Pampers. (Or was it Huggies?)

Then things became even more interesting.

Suddenly an entire host of angels showed up and filled the night with a chorus of praise to God:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”



How could these angels proclaim peace on earth when their appearance inspired fear?

### **The Personality of Peace**

The tranquil scene of barn animals and shepherds forming a perfect semi-circle around Jesus and His parents may make an ideal setting for artwork and nativity sets, but it's a long shot from reality.

It certainly doesn't explain the source of peace.

It may even mistakenly cause us to think peace was found in the quiet calm of the night, as the hymn "Silent Night" suggests.

The peace of Christmas, like its counterpart joy, was not based on the immediate circumstances of the season. It was found in the baby lying in the manger.

Isaiah 9:6 identifies Jesus as The Prince of Peace. Peace was a part of who He was. The Christmas child grew up and said in John 16:33,

*"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" [ESV].*

When everything is not right in our world, we can have peace, because we have Jesus.



Cameron Edwards is the assistant editor for the Bibleway Ministries Newsletter, a monthly publication which seeks to provide a cup of cool, refreshing spiritual encouragement in Jesus' name. Cameron is a committed Christian who is active in the children's ministry and counseling ministry at his local church. Besides writing, he enjoys reading, playing piano for his community, taking nature walks, playing pickle ball and watching family movies. Find out more at [thebiblewayministries.com](http://thebiblewayministries.com), [thebiblewayministries.com/about-our-ministry](http://thebiblewayministries.com/about-our-ministry), [thebiblewayministries.com/posts](http://thebiblewayministries.com/posts)

He overcame the world through His death on the cross and resurrection.

This means we can have peace:

*When we learn another item on our list is out of stock.*

*When government inflation reduces the value of our money.*

*When the economy slows to a standstill.*

*When we battle a debilitating illness.*

*When our family experiences a loss.*

*When our employer terminates our job.*

*When our weakness wins.*

When everything about our circumstances says otherwise, we can have peace.

Our quest for joy and peace ends with Jesus.

Faith in Him won't prevent prices from skyrocketing, inflation from ballooning, or seasonal discounts from plummeting, but it promises your joy and peace don't have to rise and fall with them.

There is a constant supply in Jesus. No matter what happens, the outcome is under His control.

That's the secret to an inflation-proof Christmas.





# waiting...

a monologue of Elisabeth, wife of the Priest

BY ELIZABETH DAGHFAL

It had been 400 long years.

Of silence.

I know. Some of you think that sounds like bliss. You're the ones with a houseful of kids, eh?

Me? I only had one child. A son. Before him, the silence was deafening. But, goodness, when he was born, it made everyone talk.

We named him "God is gracious." In Hebrew, that's *Yohanan*. I believe in English, you would say "John."

How I longed for him. All those years, months, cycles, coming and going with no fruit—finally coming to understand the truth.

I was barren.

Kind of like our country.

Because those 400 years of silence? They were also 400 years of darkness. Not in terms of daylight. The sun still rose and set.

But the kingdom was dark.

Trapped, because we chose to sit there in the shadow of death. Refused to humble ourselves, to seek God's face, to turn from our wicked ways.

And by "we," I mean the nation. Kings. Priests. Leaders. Neighbors. Moms and dads.

God tried to warn us, over and over. But we ignored all His prophets. Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea... We called them "troublers." Chased them down, shut them up. We wanted to be like all the other nations around us. With *their* gods. Their feasts. Their fun.

We didn't want to trust the one and only true God who called us by name. Brought us out of slavery in Egypt. Parted the Red Sea, fed us manna, even slayed our enemy giants.

No, none of that was enough. We wanted more. Figured we knew better.

And since we quit listening, God quit talking.

Oy, we'd lost our protection.

After all, with a word, God birthed the heavens and the earth, the fish in the sea, sheep, humans, even languages.

So if He quit talking...

Well, He told us what would happen.

Everything fell apart.

And we spent 400 long years pleading, "*Ad-anah, Adonai*—How long, O Lord?!"

Okay, to be clear, I haven't spent 400 years pleading that. I am old, but not *that* old. Even so, throughout my decades, we have cried out in our bondage. And I've heard the same accounts from my parents and their parents and their parents. All begging for our Messiah to return, to speak. *Baruch Haba*—Blessed is He who comes.

Many generations have passed down times when the Lord *did* talk with His people. Before the silent 400 years. As our late leaders Moses and Joshua said, “When your children ask in times to come, recount the stories.”

And, obviously, those stories are written in our Holy Scriptures: \*The Pentateuch, the Psalms, the Prophets. \*Writings of Moses, David, Daniel, Amos. Words all breathed through them from God. Sometimes through dreams. Sometimes through angels. Sometimes through burning bushes.

*That* would have been something special to see, huh?

Thankfully, my husband Zacharias is a priest, so he’s been blessed to study Torah and the Prophets himself. No, he can’t bring them home from the temple, but he can tell me what they say. True narratives, poems, songs of Adonai reaching out to us in ancient times. Heavens, with Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, God actually walked with them in the garden! But *that* was in the very beginning. It didn’t take them long to start the process of rejecting Him altogether.

And for the past 400 years, His connecting with us has only been something we could read about. And long for.

Did I feel the nation’s barrenness more because of my own? Possibly. I can’t compare my thoughts to others.

Yet several times through Moses, God promised that if our whole nation followed Him, no one would be barren, not even the animals.

But, of course, we as a nation did just the opposite.

So Jeremiah charged, “Take up a lament on the barren heights, for the Lord has rejected and abandoned this generation.”

Ah, those words! They’ve driven my husband and me to walk in the Lord’s commandments and righteousness. To pray for redemption.



My own barrenness felt like a curse. Those around me looking down their noses at me—“Look, the priest’s wife has no children. We must be better than she!”—presuming my barrenness showed my sin, and not the nation’s sin as a whole.

Even if I ignored the comments, I knew what would happen in just a few short years. My husband would die (he’s older than I am), and I would be left alone. Without anyone to care for me.

Desolate.

—But God.

Have there ever been two sweeter words?

*B’Sha’ah Tovah*—in a good hour—God intervened.

With a miracle.

He blessed me.

The Lord removed my disgrace as a sign that He would do so for His people.

He broke His silence for the first time in 400 years and talked to us.

Okay, strictly speaking, He talked to my husband.

But it was the precursor to Adonai’s finally sharing His Word with the whole world. And offering us redemption.

The story still gives me chills.

It was Zacharias’ week to serve in the temple, and, by lot, his turn to burn the incense. He entered the Holy Place by himself. But as he prayed, suddenly he was not alone.

Just to the right of the altar stood an angel of the Lord.

Now I don’t know what you think angels look like, but let’s be clear. There is nothing cute and cuddly about a messenger of God. It’s a frightening experience to stand before a being that stands in the presence of God. Just ask my Zach.



Fear gripped him.

Without the mercy of the Lord—well, let’s just say we are thankful for the mercy of the Lord.

The angel kindly encouraged him not to fear.

And then—*Baruch Hashem*, Blessed is the Name—what message did Almighty God choose to end His 400-year silence?

That we, Zacharias and I, a couple way advanced in years—would have a baby.

That we would name the child John.

That our son would be filled with the Holy Spirit, even in my womb.

And most importantly, that he would come in the spirit and power of Elijah—to turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the

righteous, to “make a people ready for the Lord.”

My son would be a prophet of the Most High. We would no longer live barren in the dark. Instead, as my husband would later prophesy, John would announce the birth of peace, the visit of the Sunrise, our horn of salvation.

Talk about God making some noise!

However, that day with the angel? Oy, now it was my husband who was silent. Not because he wanted to be, but because he’d been struck mute. For the next nine months. Because he dared question the word of God’s messenger.

I told you angels were nothing to dismiss.

Zacharias walked out of the Holy Place unable to speak, and everyone knew he’d seen a vision.

Everything happened quickly after that. At the end of his week of service, he returned to me, and wonder of wonders, the angel’s words proved true.

I became pregnant.

But I wasn’t ready for everyone to know.

Some secrets are too delicious to share right away.

So I secluded myself for five months and enjoyed my pregnant pause, for the Lord had looked on me with favor and taken away my disgrace.

It makes me smile even now.

But one day in my sixth month, God revealed an even greater blessing.

As I puttered around the house, my front door opened.

“*Shalom*, Cousin Elisabeth.”

The voice was quiet, breathless, almost a question. But the impact resounded through my womb, my son leaping for joy.

And I cried out with a loud voice. “How is it that the mother of my Lord would come to me?”



*You shall multiply the nation*  
**UNTO US A CHILD IS**  
*Increase their gladness*  
**BORN**  
*Shine a great light on them*

I now knew how it felt to be filled with the Holy Spirit as He proclaimed the truth to my soul. While my child was a gift, there was one much greater on the way who would shine light in our darkness, our barrenness birthing joy.

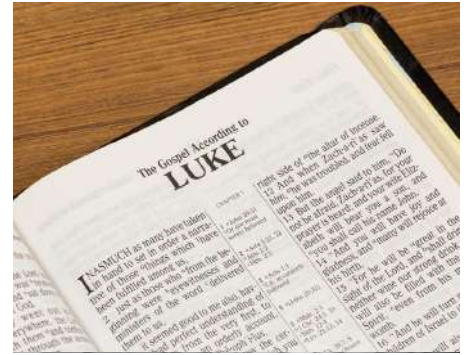
Yes. To my husband, our Almighty God had broken 400 years of silence. Yes, through my child, the Lord would call many to return to Him.

But through the fruit of the womb of my dear, sweet, young cousin Mary, God would shout to the world with one everlasting Word.

His Word becoming flesh to dwell among us.

A voice that would not only speak to the world but would change it forever. Never to be silent again.

Will we listen?



*A retelling of Luke 1 [NASB] from the perspective of Elisabeth, wife of Zacharias*

*(Also Jeremiah 7:29, NIV & Exodus 12:26; 13:14, Joshua 4:6ff [paraphrased])*



It's no secret. Elizabeth Daghfal would rather write than sleep. Her novels, columns, picture books, and plays all weave anecdotes and tales that meet you where you are, show you're not alone, and give you hope. Hence her website title, *Nothing Beats a Great Story*.

"Waiting" is one in a series of nativity monologues that Elizabeth is writing. Interested in having her speak or using this or one of her other dramatic presentations at your church or event? [Contact her here](#). (Her students can't wait to see what object lesson or crazy demonstration she'll create next.)

To read more of her work and/or sign up for her newsletter, find her at [ElizabethDaghfal.com](http://ElizabethDaghfal.com), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#).

*AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH*

*In the beginning was the Word*

*AND DWELT AMONG US*

*And the Word is God*



## ***UNWRAP GOD'S GIFTS***

God gives the gift of hope—  
It comes this time of year  
To all whose hearts are weary,  
It comes to bring them cheer!

God gives the gift of peace—  
Here on a silent night!  
It calms the anxious heart,  
And to darkness it brings Light!

God gives the gift of joy—  
To hearts downcast & sad!  
A Savior comes to save the lost,  
To make each lost heart glad!

God gives the gift of Love—  
It's faithful! Never-ending!  
It's wrapped in swaddling clothes for you.  
God's gift...His Son is sending!

Unwrap these gifts God gives to you!  
Hope, peace, joy, love—No price!  
They come with the very best gift of all...  
The gift of Jesus Christ!

Merry CHRISTmas!

Karen R. Lueders



Karen Lueders and her husband Bill live in Wisconsin. She is a grateful, proud mother and grandmother who loves to write. It is her prayer that her writing refreshes hearts, nourishes souls, and points to Jesus who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Unwrap God's Gifts is found in her book, God's Promise of Salvation. Click on the book covers for more information.



# Guest Artist



Geri Hanson is a northern Wisconsin girl living in southern Minnesota. She grew up in a Christian, artistic family, in the middle of a national forest. Continually inspired by that experience, she paints with acrylic and latex to create original canvases, murals, and windows that reflect the peace and beauty she finds in nature.

Her palette now includes the use of digital art as seen on the cover, pages 28, and 33. Her works express joy, happiness, and the spiritual connection to faith. She hopes they'll provide enjoyment and inspiration to others.

Connect to Geri [Gschmeckha@gmail.com](mailto:Gschmeckha@gmail.com)

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# Christmas Cookies

## A Sweet Tradition that Shares Our Love

by Linda Carter

When the holidays come around, I always look forward to “Cookie Day” and the joy of baking, as my kitchen turns into a sweet-smelling factory of goodness. The recipe sharing, cookie exchanges, and especially the gifting of my home-baked goods, all add up to a special kind of holiday cheer in my world.

Giving a gift of something we’ve put our time and hands into has a very personal sentiment that other gifts just can’t offer, and making a batch of cookies is something almost anyone can do, on almost any budget. In fact, if we have the ingredients around the house, the gift doesn’t cost us any money, but it’s hard to put a value on a personal gift that speaks of pure love when it’s given.

One of the things I love about these gifts is that it gives me a chance to connect with my neighbors. Our modern world has us so isolated, that we don’t get to know the people next door the way we used to. But during the holidays I have an excuse to love on them a little bit.

After making all the cookies, I wrap them in plastic wrap with a little ribbon, then put them into a plain white paper lunch bag. I like to decorate the bags by gluing on old Christmas card artwork that I have saved just for this purpose.

I’ll insert a Christmas card (that tells the real Christmas message) with a note that the gift is from their neighbors “the Carters” just down the street. Sometimes we will also insert a flyer about a holiday event at our church as well. It helps to roll down the top and staple a ribbon handle to the top too. This is handy for carrying them and hanging the bags on doorknobs.





So my bags are ready, and it's time to deliver. My husband and I walk around the block with our bags and actually knock on doors to introduce ourselves and say, "Merry Christmas! We just wanted to bless our neighbors with a little homemade gift. I don't believe we've met? We live right around the corner..." This generally follows with some conversation and shaking of hands. We usually don't accept invitations to come in at this time because we are doing our "rounds," and it takes all pressure off the impromptu visit for them.

If we already know the neighbor, sometimes we just hang the gift, ring the bell, and continue our walk. If they come to the door and see us, we wave and say, "Merry Christmas!" Over the years they get used to the tradition, and even if we don't get to know them any better than that, it leaves them with a goodwill feeling toward us, which is always a good thing. Even the grumpiest neighbors like cookies, right?

We always have a few extra bags to hand out to the mail carrier, the UPS man, or anyone else that comes to mind. The great thing about "Cookie Day" is that I love the creative baking and decorating, but giving it away keeps me from eating it all! So I get to have all the fun without all the calories. (Ok, maybe I get a few of those calories!)

If you're looking for an excuse to meet your neighbors, this is a fun way to get the whole family involved and spread a little good cheer in your neighborhood.



Linda Carter writes devotional books focused on the lessons and peace found in creation. She is a certified California Naturalist, bringing her love of nature into her writings. She also mentors and teaches women. She is a mother of 1, a grandmother of 6, and is semi-retired, residing in a small mountain community in Northern California.

You can connect with Linda at:  
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# Elizabeth's Family Favorite Gingerbread Cookie Recipe



Every year, my kids hold a gingerbread house contest, and this is our go-to recipe. Bake it a little more for the perfect wall-construction. Bake a little less for a YUMMY afternoon treat. I hope you love it as much as we do!

## World's Best Gingerbread Dough

*(makes 24 four-inch cookies OR  
6 8x8 house panels)*

3½ cups all-purpose flour  
1 tsp baking soda  
½ tsp salt  
1 Tbsp ground ginger  
1 Tbsp ground cinnamon  
½ tsp ground allspice  
½ tsp ground cloves  
¾ cup (10 Tbsp) unsalted butter, softened  
¾ cup packed brown sugar  
¾ cup dark molasses  
1 large egg, room temperature  
1 tsp vanilla



## Cookie directions:

1. Combine dry ingredients: **flour, soda, salt, ginger, cinnamon, allspice, and cloves.** (*Don't skimp on spices, especially ginger 😊*) Set aside.
2. Combine wet ingredients:
  - \*With mixer, beat **butter** for *1 minute* until creamy.
  - \*Add **brown sugar** and **molasses** and beat again until creamy, scraping down bowl sides to mix well.
  - \*Add **egg** and **vanilla** and beat on HIGH *2 minutes*.
3. Add dry ingredients to wet and beat on LOW until combined. (Expect it to be sticky and thick!)
4. Divide dough in half, wrap each piece tightly in plastic wrap, and flatten down to discs less than 1 inch thick. (Makes it easier to roll later.) **Chill** dough *at least 3 hours* or overnight. (DON'T skip this step.)
5. Remove one disc. Flour table/hands/rolling pin, and roll dough a few times, then flip dough. Roll again and flip. (Flipping keeps it from sticking to the table.) Continue until dough is ¼ inch thick. Cut out cookie (or wall) shapes. Reroll dough scraps and cut out more cookies. Continue with 2nd disc.
6. Line baking sheet with silicone mat or parchment paper and place cookies 1 in. apart. (For large walls, you may want to roll/cut right on the mat.)
7. Bake at **350 degrees:**
  - \***8-9 min.** for soft small [3 in. or less] cookies
  - \***11 min.** for soft larger [4 in. or more] cookies
  - \***15-18+ min.** for sturdy large walls.(Time/temp may need adjustments for your oven, especially as you bake several batches.)



## Budget Your Blessings: Gift-Giving Tips for a Blessed Christmas

The holiday season is a time for warmth, joy, and celebration with loved ones. For many, it's also a time of financial stress and anxiety. Overspending for Christmas leads to more than a dent in your bank account. It can steal joy from what should be a cherished time of the year. But you can ensure a joyful, less stressful Christmas simply by budgeting.

### Why Bother With a Christmas Gift Budget?

Budgeting for Christmas gifts can significantly enhance your holiday experience. It's a game-changer for your holiday spirit, and here's why:

- **Financial Peace.** When you set a gift-giving budget, you take the reins. You know exactly what you can spend without going into debt, and that's an extra gift to yourself.
- **Reduced Stress.** The hustle and bustle of deciding on gifts, shopping, and decorating your living space can cause significant stress. Setting a budget helps you stay on top of your spending to reduce stress and enhance your holiday spirit.
- **Meaningful Gifts.** Budgeting nudges you to give creative gifts, which often are more personal and meaningful. No more last-minute, generic presents.
- **Focus on Blessings.** Freeing yourself from money worries lets you focus on what really counts during the season: celebrating Jesus, spending quality time with family and friends, and enjoying cherished traditions.

### Kickstart Your Gift-Giving Budget

Before you dive into Christmas shopping, set an amount you can realistically spend for all the gifts this Christmas. Ensure the amount won't strain your finances. For less stressful spending in future years, start putting aside a specified amount each month or pay period, starting in January. You'll experience more joy with less worry.



### Crafting Your Gift List

List everyone you give presents to, starting with immediate family and close friends. Include everyone for whom you shop every Christmas. Assign each a maximum amount based on your overall budget. Subtract each amount as you allocate it, tweaking the numbers as you go. If things get tight, get more creative with your gifts.

For those who don't make the cut, whip up some cookies or a DIY gift to stretch your budget and still spread holiday cheer.

Plan your gift strategy. With dollar amounts in mind for everyone, think about how you want to divvy up the cash. Will you buy one big gift or spread the love with a few smaller ones? The choice is yours. And don't forget to check your gift stash for any presents you already have on hand.



### Remember the Wrapping and Shipping Costs

Other expenses besides the gifts can chew up your cash. Wrapping and shipping also cost money. If you're sending gifts, consider lighter, smaller presents. Perhaps you can ship everything to one central spot, like a grandparent's home, where everyone can pick up their gifts. Or mail the item directly from an online store, using their wrapping and free shipping services. Even if they charge, the cost is often less expensive than mailing yourself.

As you ramp up the holiday spirit, remember that creating a Christmas budget doesn't mean depriving yourself or your loved ones. It's about making intentional choices that align with your financial goals and values. By setting a budget, you focus on having a meaningful holiday season that's all about love, togetherness, and gratitude. And that's what this season is all about.

A well-planned budget can make your Christmas more joyful, leaving you with cherished memories unblemished by financial stress. And always remember that our ultimate gift, Jesus, is the reason for this season!

### Gifts That Stretch Your Budget:

**•Homemade Goodies.** Whip up a batch of your famous cookies or a crafty DIY project, like personalized ornaments. These are both heartfelt and budget-friendly. Pinterest is full of ideas.

**•Experiences.** Consider gifting experiences like a spa day, a cooking class, or concert tickets. These can be more memorable than physical gifts and might fit your budget better.

**•Handmade Photo Albums.** Create a personalized photo album with cherished memories. You can compile photos, add captions, and decorate pages with craft supplies. Make it a thoughtful, budget-friendly gift.

**•Cookbook.** Compile your favorite family recipes into a homemade cookbook, including personal notes or stories with each recipe. Combine tradition, nostalgia, and a dash of creativity.

**•Indoor Plants.** A small potted plant or succulent brings life and warmth to any space. Affordable and easy to care for, they come in various sizes and varieties.

**•Coupon Book.** Create a coupon book with favors or services you're willing to provide. You might include offers such as "one free home-cooked meal," "a night of babysitting," or "help with gardening." This gift is not only budget-friendly but also a thoughtful way to show you care.

**•Homemade Bath and Body Products.** Craft your own bath salts, sugar scrubs, or scented candles, and package them in attractive containers or jars. Customize the scents and ingredients to suit the recipients' preferences.



These gifts are easy on your wallet and demonstrate your thoughtfulness and creativity, making them perfect for spreading holiday cheer without overspending.

### Small, Lightweight Gift Ideas:

• **Customized Jewelry.** Personalized necklaces, bracelets, or earrings can be lightweight and compact, making them ideal for shipping. You can have them engraved with a name or a special message.

• **Handwritten Letters or Cards.** A heartfelt letter or personalized greeting card can brighten someone's day, and is simple, lightweight, and easy to mail.

• **Gourmet Tea or Coffee.** A small tin of high-quality tea or a bag of gourmet coffee beans is a delightful and lightweight gift for someone who enjoys a hot beverage.

• **Miniature Art Prints** Send a small, frameable art print that fits easily into a padded envelope. Choose artwork that aligns with the recipient's interests or decor.

• **Pocket-sized Notebooks.** A compact, stylish notebook is both practical and lightweight. They come with attractive covers and can even be customized.



ID 201864801 © Stokkete | Dreamstime.com

• **Candles in Travel Tins.** Scented or decorative candles in travel-sized tins are compact and lightweight, making them perfect for shipping. Choose scents that suit the recipients' preferences.

• **Stylish Keychains.** Keychains come in a variety of designs and materials. When they reflect the recipients' hobbies or interests, they become a thoughtful and portable gift.

• **Seed Packets.** Send the gardening enthusiast a collection of flower or herb seed packets. Small and lightweight, they can bring joy throughout the planting season.

These small and lightweight gifts are not only easy to mail but also thoughtful gestures that show you care, no matter the distance.



Krisann Blair, founder and heart behind Christmas Organizing since 1998, shares her deep love for the holiday season passed down by her mother. She's known as "[the Christmas Coach](#)," offering valuable Christmas planning advice through books, her website, and YouTube channel, [Christmas Organizing](#). Krisann also provides exclusive tips through the Candy Cane Club on Patreon. A prolific author, she's currently working on a 'Tis the Season to Get Organized book series.

Married for 31 years, Krisann and her husband Ashley, have three loving children: Ashlyn, Aaron, and Destiny.

Krisann is dedicated to preserving the tradition of a meaningful and organized Christmas. Visit [Christmas Planning Resources](#) for a list of resources Krisann has to offer.



# A Heart for Christmas

by Laurie Herlich

The first thing you noticed when you entered the room was the antiseptic odor, with a coppery undertone, then the beeping machine evidencing a heartbeat. Mechanical, but a heartbeat, nonetheless. The constant undercurrent of an electronic hum and a whirring noise.

I could also hear conversations from the nurse's desk, and conflicting television shows added to the mild cacophony.

It broke my heart to see him like this. Pale skin with blue lips and fingertips. There were tubes and wires everywhere. They connected him to devices that kept him alive and miserable. My hands shook with the effort of holding myself together.

I couldn't let him see how desperate his situation was and risk having him give up. He had been the love of my life since we met in grade school. Life without him would be unimaginable. Eventually one of us would lay the other into the arms of Jesus and go on alone, but not this young, not even close to fifty.

I looked around the room as he slept. Our friends had hung holiday decorations around the room. Green and red tinsel garlands, festive pictures, even a small group of gaily wrapped gifts sitting on a side table. Not much of a holiday.

First, the cancer tried to eat him alive. Then, the first surgery, and the next. Months of chemo, watching him retch and grow wraith-like. The soft, comfortable layer of fat over the strong muscles disappeared, and I could feel every rib when I hugged him.

At last, chemotherapy was over, he proudly rang the bell, and arm in arm we walked forward into a glorious future as we had on the day we married. We thanked God each new morning.

For a while things got better. We started with short strolls through the neighborhood and healthy meals. We graduated to longer walks, then short jogs.

One day he stopped suddenly. "I'm still so out of shape. I can't go as fast as I'd like to. Do you mind if we turn for home and walk the rest of the way?"

Of course, I didn't mind, I had always struggled to keep up with him. We walked more than jogged, then walked more slowly.

"This isn't normal. It appears you're losing ground not regaining your strength."

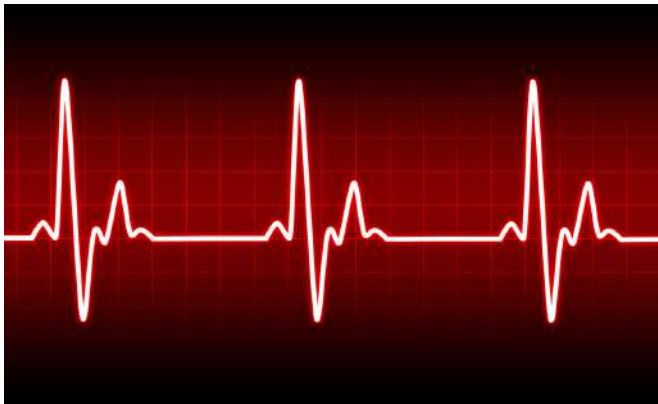
"Honey, I've already seen a lifetime of doctors," he'd say.

When he became winded by walking from room to room, I insisted that we see the doctor.

Innumerable tests later, they determined that the chemotherapy that had saved him from the cancer had also damaged his heart. Not his ability to love, that was more powerful than ever, but his physical middle-aged heart.



During the next two years, we moved from a vest that shocked his heart into beating to a Mitra Clip to a Left Ventricle Assisting Device. Here we were back again in Cardiac Intensive Care.



Each device eventually lost effectiveness as his heart grew weaker and weaker. Yet every day, his faith grew stronger. He moved from expecting daily to be miraculously healed to realizing that healing might not occur on earth, but that healing would eventually come one way or the other.

I was carried along in the wake of his faith, still leaning on him, even as I came to terms with the fact that it was less and less likely that he would be there to lean on for much longer.

The thing that kept us hoping against reality was that in all this time the cancer had not returned. He was now a candidate for a heart transplant.

"I cannot pray for someone else to die so that I can live," he said several times.

I could not pray that way either.

The December days inched along. We heard Christmas carols sung in the hallways as often as we heard code blue announcements pleading for response by the doctors and staff.

He grew weaker.

“Looks like I may be celebrating Jesus’ birthday with him in person, honey,” he said and managed a weak smile before drifting back to sleep.

Here I sat on the evening of the 24th of December, clinging to his hand, praying.

Suddenly, the room became a whirlwind of activity.

My husband was woken, and the doctor let us know a compatible heart had suddenly become available.

What we could not ask for, God provided. A tragedy for someone was a gift from God for us.

And what a gift! He was receiving a heart for Christmas!



Laurie Herlich loves living in rural northeast Tennessee, where Story is everything. She writes flash fiction and cozy mysteries in a converted garden hut situated in her backyard.

Laurie is a regular contributor to [www.christiandevotions.us](http://www.christiandevotions.us) and won a Selah award in the online devotion category as well as first place for unpublished novella in the BRMCWC Foundation Awards.

She is also a contributor/performer for Jonesborough, Tennessee’s StoryTown NPR Radio Show/Podcast and is a StoryTeller with the Jonesborough Storytelling Guild.

Connect with Laurie on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

Every good and perfect  
gift is from above.

James 1:17 NIV





# Have You Held Mary's Baby?

By Lynn U. Watson



Image by [Pexels](#) from [Pixabay](#).

What is the most over-the-top birth announcement you have received? Parents today compete to find the most unique means to spread the news of their newest arrival because their child is, of course, the most special baby ever. But none top God's message when His Son was born. He blew the top right off.

Angels delivered the most original birth announcement ever to a group of lowly shepherds. Imagine the shining, dancing sky and the symphonious chorus above them. The message the angels proclaimed bordered on unbelievable and frightening. The shepherds believed and ran to the manger to see the One who is the most special Baby ever.

*"When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'"*

*~ Luke 2:15*

After the announcement, the shepherds took off to find the baby, running straight to the place the angels directed them. In their excitement did they knock eagerly, or did they find a closed door and wonder if they arrived at the right barn? Would the door be shut in their faces? Did it enter their minds to say, "Who are we anyway that we dare to believe we will be received?"

By whatever means they gained his attention, Joseph came to the door to be met by a rough and tumble crew of lowly farm hands. Imagine the explanation required of why they should be allowed into the sacred birthing space. It's unlikely others witnessed the scene meant for them. Would anyone believe their tale?

We know from the Bible they were welcomed. As the shepherds entered the barn, they would not have noticed the smells. They lived and breathed farm aromas every day. They would not have noticed the chill in the air. They lived outdoors with their sheep. But they would have noticed Mom and Dad with the Newborn Babe—the very Lamb of God.



These burly guys tenderly cared for sheep. They showed toughness when needed but provided gentleness when they held their lambs in their arms. They protected and cared for them with fierce commitment. Likely, the shepherds gaped in awe at Mary and Joseph’s dedication, protection, and love for their Son—just like theirs for their own sheep’s tiny babes.

I wish we could have heard the conversation between Mary and Joseph and the shepherds. How did the shepherds describe the birth announcement to His parents? Could any words recount the enormity of the miraculous events surrounding this Child’s birth? We know Mary treasured and pondered the words in her heart.

With the birth of a baby, visitors come as admirers. After the shepherds shared the event spurring their visit, did Mary offer for them to hold her Boy? Who says “no” to that? Did the shepherds cradle their Savior in their arms that night like cradling one of their lambs? Did they hold Him and behold Him? Did a reverent hush fill the place? What additional conversation would the opportunity have sparked? We know whatever they experienced in His presence sent them out with urgency to share Tidings of Great Joy with the world.

*“When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.”*

*~ Luke 2:17-18*



Everyone they told was amazed. They spread the excitement that only comes from a personal encounter with Jesus. How many more visitors stopped by to see for themselves? How many came to behold this Infant? How many held Perfect Love even briefly? Were they filled with the hope only Jesus can offer?

Picture yourself at the stable. Mary lifts the infant towards you and asks, “Would you like to hold Jesus?” What thoughts run through your mind? You smile, nod, and receive the swaddled Bundle. You know the story well as you reflect. Your emotions hang heavy. A tough challenge to give words to them, isn’t it?

Are you overwhelmed with the love you see in His baby face? What sparkle of joy and acceptance of you fills His eyes? Do you plant a gentle kiss on His cheek? He squeezes your finger, and you hope He will never let go.

Do you wonder what thoughts He has toward you as He looks into your eyes and feels your arms around Him and your hand stroking his fuzzy head? Does He see the plans God has for your life? Does He hope you realize He cherishes the intimacy the two of you share in this moment, and He desires this relationship with you forever and always?

Through your encounter, you recognize this Infant is the most special Baby ever. God delivered Jesus into our world—a world where He loves all without a care to their station or situation. No matter what they've done, where they've been. That includes you.

Do you feel the weight of your sin knowing in 33 short years this Infant will die a grueling death so you will live forever? By His life, His death, and His resurrection you are forgiven.  
Do you feel the glowing hope of eternity He brings to a lost world and to your life?

*"Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."  
~ Luke 2:19*

What will you treasure and ponder this Christmas? Have You Held Mary's Baby?

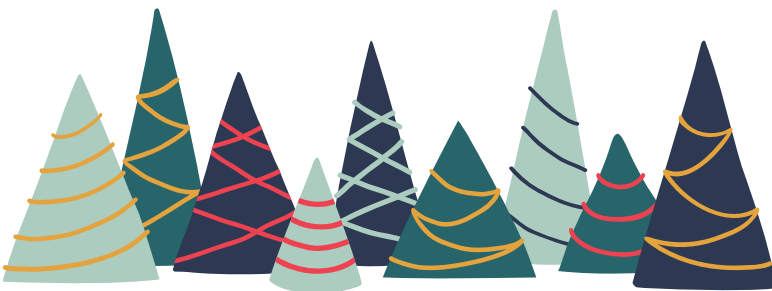
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Lynn Watson is a devotional writer, occasional quilter, reflexologist, and great-great-grand-daughter of a baron from Southwest Germany. Snippets of her family's story inspired her debut novel, *Tangled Promises* (releasing May 2024), and its sequels. Lynn combines her passions and heritage *Stepping Through Time Stitching Stories of Faith*. She and husband, Steve, make their home in Bartlett, TN. Jasmine the resident feline, like her peers, considers herself Princess of the Palace.



[Instagram](#) [Facebook](#)





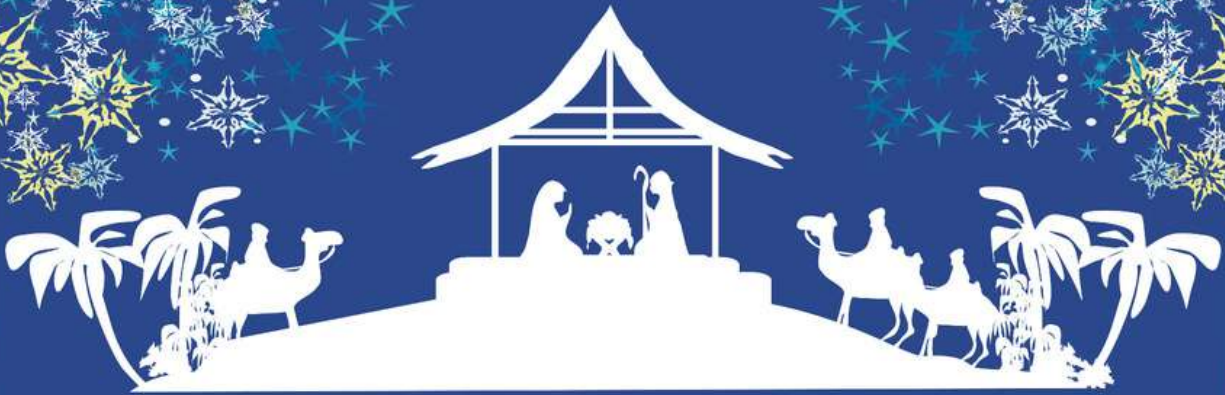
TODAY IN THE TOWN OF DAVID A  
SAVIOR HAS BEEN BORN TO YOU;  
HE IS CHRIST THE LORD.

**LUKE 2:11 NIV**



## ONE TINY KING

BY CINDY LESCARBEAU



Snowflakes lingering in the air,  
gaze upon him lying there  
cooing softly in the night  
'neath David's star shining bright.

Frosty blanket, dress the earth  
to celebrate his royal birth.  
Warm in woolen cloud, he lay  
nestled in a wreath of hay.

Sheep and cattle resting by,  
palm tree branches waving high,  
kings and shepherds flock below,  
peering through the winter snow.

All give thanks that God would bring  
His kingdom through one tiny King.



Cindy Freed Lescarbeau has enjoyed writing poetry since the first grade. She founded FREED Performing Arts, Inc., teaches actors, and directs plays as an adult. Cindy's passion is to inspire children with wonder and joy through her fantastical tales with whimsical characters and twisty endings. As an award-winning author of picture books, poetry, and plays, as well as a popular speaker, she impacts the lives of those locally and across the world. Word Weavers International named Cindy their 2020 Writer of the Year. Her stories and poems can be found in Focus on The Family's Clubhouse Jr. Magazine. Visit [CindyLescarbeau.com](http://CindyLescarbeau.com).





# WELCOME HOME, OTIS BROWN

BY RUTH SCHMECKPEPER

Otis Brown parked across the street from St. John's Church on the corner of Elm and Franklin. Through the darkness, he watched the parking lot fill and families hustle into the warmth of the old brick building. Children skipped and couples held hands. Two minutes before the Christmas Eve service, he shuffled toward his childhood parish, hoping to slip into a back pew unnoticed.

Cold bit at his fingers through thin gloves. He hitched his overcoat a little tighter and worked his way into the house of God, where lights glowed and the organ played softly. A tall Christmas tree stood next to the pulpit. Years ago, on that very stage, he and his brother Bobby recited their scripture pieces during the children's program.

Times had changed. The hope of Otis becoming somebody special had long since died—about the time his Miriam went to heaven, leaving him with two young boys to parent.

He wished he'd been a better father. Wished he'd quit drinking sooner. Wished he hadn't chased his sons off. What he wouldn't give to be welcomed into their homes now. Did he have grandchildren? Sober for three years didn't give him the right to push his way into their lives.

Otis found an empty spot on the left side, fourth row from the back. Close enough to watch the service but slip out if needed. He loosened the buttons on his coat but didn't hang it on the rack with the others. He wouldn't stay long. Just enough to say his prayers. He sank onto the wooden pew and set his hat on his lap.

The gray-haired woman next to him turned with a smile. "Otis Brown, I never thought I'd see you here."

Just his luck to sit next to Miriam's best friend, Joyce Schroeder. Couldn't she keep her voice down?

Joyce wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "Merry Christmas, Brother Otis. I've missed you."

He put a little distance between himself and Joyce.

Pastor Mike greeted the congregation.

Otis caught his breath. Same deep voice, but he'd matured twenty-some years.



The swell of the organ and the verses of familiar carols warmed his heart. Words for “Joy to the World,” “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” and “Away in a Manger” scrolled on a big screen as the congregation joined in song.

Three dozen youngsters dressed in their Christmas finery stood on the platform. They retold the story of Jesus, born in a manger. The story of shepherds, invited to meet the holy child.

Otis leaned forward, listening intently for each word the children said as they reported that a savior had been born. He knew it from memory. But could Jesus really save someone as sinful as him?

If only he could undo the wasted years.

A young girl dancing on her tiptoes approached the microphone. “This baby was the gift God promised for our salvation. ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life’” (John 3:16, NIV).

Joyce turned to him, a tear running down her face. She pressed a hand to her chest. “Ain’t it amazing? He sent his son to save miserable souls like us.”



Otis bent his head. What would it take to claim that kind of love for himself?

He looked up in time to see a small boy holding the microphone too close to his mouth. “Come to Jesus.” The boy handed the mic to the next child.



“He’s waiting for you.”

Children gathered on the steps as the organist played “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Together they sang,

“O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings  
tell;

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.”

Pastor Mike returned to the chancel clapping. “Thank you, children, for sharing the message with us tonight. Didn’t they do a wonderful job?”

He stepped behind the altar. “Let’s celebrate by sharing the meal Jesus gave us the night before he died.”

Pastor Mike spoke the words of scripture and blessed the bread and wine. People streamed up to the front for the Lord’s Supper.

Though his heart yearned for forgiveness, Otis’ feet weighed like cement.

When most had partaken, Joyce took his elbow. “C’mon. Let’s get right with God tonight.”

She grinned and tugged his arm, but he pulled back. She didn’t understand. He wasn’t worthy.

She tugged again. “Nothing you did was so bad you can’t find forgiveness here.”

What if Pastor Mike refused to serve him? What if he shamed Otis in front of God and all these people?

Joyce stood. "Let's go."

"I can't."

"I know. That's why we'll do this together."

"I gotta leave."

Joyce gave him a look that promised she wasn't backing down. He stood, wobbling slightly. This wasn't going to be pretty, but she already knew that.

They were last in line, Joyce gripping his arm every step of the way.

What if he got thrown out?

The couple before them accepted the bread and wine and stepped out of the way. Then Pastor Mike raised his eyes to meet Otis's. There was a pause as recognition registered on the pastor's face. Then a smile curved his lips, and joy flooded his expression. He offered the wafer and spoke the words, "His body, given for you." He held out the cup of wine. "Shed for you."

Otis panicked. He couldn't have alcohol. He flashed the AA coin from his pocket.

Mike nodded to the chalice. "This one's grape juice."

When he and Joyce had been served, Pastor Mike stepped out from behind the small table. Arms open, he grabbed Otis in a hug. Time stopped as the two stood in the front of the congregation.

"Dad! Welcome home," he whispered into Otis's ear.

Choked with emotion, Otis pulled back and pressed the Alcoholics Anonymous coin denoting sobriety into his son's hand. "It's not much, but it's all I have."

"It's the best gift ever." A tear ran down Michael's cheek. He swiped it away.

Joyce squeezed Otis's arm. "Don't worry, Pastor. I won't let him get away." She walked him back to their pew and winked. "That man's been praying for your return to the family of God for twenty-four years. He won't give up on you, and neither will God. Welcome home, Otis Brown."



Award-winning author, Ruth Schmeckpeper writes heartwarming stories to encourage women in their faith. While working toward publication for her two contemporary Christian fiction novels, she writes short stories, helps others get published, and is working on her third novel. She serves on launch teams, reviews books, and invites new authors to participate in projects.

Christmas can be a tough time for people who aren't feeling the joy of Jesus. Ruth has a heart for encouraging and providing support during dark days.

Ruth's favorite place to connect with readers is through her monthly newsletter, filled with messages of hope and encouragement, book recommendations, author updates, and something fun just for you.

Ruth's [Newsletter](#) [Instagram](#) [Facebook](#)

# CONTEMPORARY CHRISTMAS SONGS THAT WILL TOUCH YOUR HEART

*with video links \**



## **1 FATHER, DO YOU SEE**

*For Advent, a song of longing with a jazzy blues feel.  
(Daughter Zion's Woe, Cardiphonia Music)*

## **2 PREPARE HIM ROOM**

*(Sovereign Grace Music,  
by Rebecca Elliott and Dave Fournier)*

## **3 HOW MANY KINGS?**

*(by Jason Ronald William Germain /  
Marc A. Martel)*

## **4 HE WHO IS MIGHTY**

*(Sovereign Grace Music)*

## **5 CHRISTMAS HALLELUJAH**

*(Caleb and Kelsey Grimm)*

## **6 PEACE**

*A Spoken Word piece  
(Lyrics by Alana Williams, Mark Giannulis  
Music by Justin Powell, Angel Plata)*

## **7 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS**

*and just for fun,  
(StraightNo Chaser)*

*\*click titles for video links*

# CHRISTMAS LIGHTS THAT LAST

BY SUE FINK



A favorite holiday tradition during my childhood was a slow Christmas Eve drive to see outdoor lights and decorations. Ironically, Santa visited our home at the same time my brother, Dad, and I toured the area neighborhoods.

In recent years, many parks and gardens attract winter visitors with elaborate light and sound displays. Despite my wondering what Minions and Star Wars scenes have to do with celebrating Christ's birth, these designs remain popular.

The Christmas light tradition anticipates the holiday and assists us in coping with long, cold winter nights. Light brightens our moods as it dispels fear and gives hope. If you've ever been in a power outage, toured a cave, or gone camping on a moonless night, you know the value of light.

God reminds us of the value of his light, in Psalm 119:105, NIV,  
*"Your words are a lamp for my feet and a light for my path."*

Without a dependable truth-light, life's pathways would be dangerous, if not terrifying. We are blessed and protected as we rely on God's flashlight, his word, for our daily direction.

In this same Psalm, King David detailed his intimacy with God's word. Do you pursue any of the following disciplines?

- v. 11 I have hidden your word in my heart.
- v. 16 I delight in your decrees.
- v. 35 Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.
- v. 36 Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain.
- v. 42 I can answer anyone who taunts me, for I trust in your word.

Amidst the responsibilities of ruling and guiding God's people, King David remembered his Creator's covenants and commands. Founded on the word of God, he was motivated to share God's loving promises with others.

This same circular evangelical mission-action continues today. The Holy Spirit prompts us to read, learn, and remember scripture. Then, as we stay on his path, the word empowers us to offer the Light of the world to others.

But how can believers influence others, especially those walking in worldly darkness?

The Apostle Paul answers this question, encouraging us to "shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life." (Philippians 2:15-16 [NIV])

With the Holy Spirit's power, we shine as we welcome a new neighbor or visit those who are lonely or sick. We pray our donations of time and money will reflect the Lord's love light. Even amid a culture that continues to grow darker, we have the sure hope that God will continue to enlighten us with his word and save souls.

Dear Lord,  
Help me to delight in, remember, and reflect your truth-light all year long,  
as brightly as the angels announcing Jesus' birth.  
In His Name,  
Amen



Susan L. Fink is the author of [Self-Care: Selfish or Sacred?](#) and [Developing a Devoted Family](#). A continual student of scripture, she encourages others to seek and share the joy of "hearts burning within us" for Jesus and his word. She has worked as a nursing home CNA and activities leader, managed hospice volunteers, facilitated grief groups, taught various ages, and been a well-received speaker on the topic of busyness and Christian self-care. Her children's picture book: [Lila the Ladybug Learns Self-Care](#) will be released in December. See Susan's blog, interviews, book excerpts, and ordering information on [www.SusanLFink.com](http://www.SusanLFink.com).



# A Christmas Miracle

By Leone Byron



Kathy watched the blowing snow from her window and sighed. She hated to miss this first Christmas with her sister after returning to Buffalo, but she couldn't take any chances.

"So, you're not coming tomorrow?" Beth's voice sounded worried on the cell phone call.

"Sorry, Sis, I can't. I've checked the weather every thirty minutes, and nothing's changed. They're still predicting high winds, poor visibility, and several feet of snow." Looking wistfully at the wrapped presents on the table she continued, "Driving from the city to your house is too risky."

Beth said, "I understand. You stay safe. We'll call you tomorrow and do a video Christmas."

"Sounds good, see you tomorrow." Kathy put her phone back in her pocket. Pulling leftovers from the refrigerator, she remembered the turkey, stuffing, rolls, and apple pies from past Christmases and sighed again. Christmas wouldn't be the same this year.

Hearing a noise at the window, she looked outside, only to discover that the world beyond her front yard had disappeared, and a foot of snow covered the ground. Things were changing faster than she'd expected.

As she moved to the front door to check the driveway, a sudden gust of wind shook the house, and the lights went dark. "This can't be happening—no power means no heat." She quickly prayed that both the power and the heat would be back on soon. She shivered just thinking how cold it could get.

Minutes ticked by. Not sure what to do, she called her sister. "I've lost power, and my heat is out.

"Oh no," Beth said. "When did it happen?"

"About fifteen minutes ago. I'm worried; I called the power company. They said transformers are down across the city, and they can't say when the power will be restored."

"Father God," Beth prayed, "please watch over Kathy. Help her to keep warm and know that You're with her during the storm."

"Thank you, your prayers mean a lot to me." Kathy ended the call.

As the hours passed and the house got colder, Kathy bundled in her coat, slippers, and wrapped up in a blanket, jogged around her living room to keep warm.

She looked at the thermostat again. Forty-eight degrees. No surprise there—the house was old and there'd been no time to weatherproof it before winter. Why hadn't she left with her neighbors? Now the roads were impassable, and she was trapped in an ice box.

Her phone rang. It was Beth. "Just checking in," she said. "How are you holding up?"

"The power is still off, and the house is freezing. It's only about forty-eight degrees in here."

"You can't stay there, Kathy. You need to leave."

"I know, but I'm stuck, and my neighbors aren't home. I think my only other option is to stay in my car. It's the only place where I can keep warm."

"Do you have enough gas to keep the car running?"

"I should. I just filled the tank yesterday. According to the specs on my car, I can idle it for up to thirty hours if I'm using the heat."

Beth sighed loudly over the phone. "I'll let everyone know. We'll be praying for you."

Not knowing how long she might have to wait, Kathy called 911 to let them know about her situation. She gathered water, a few snack bars, and a heavy blanket for the car. Finally, checking that she had both her phone and its charger, she headed outside.

Bracing her face away from the frigid air, Kathy floundered through the knee-deep snow to her car. After digging her car door free from the snow, she got inside, turned on the heat, and waited for the car to get warm. She rubbed her hands together and blew on them to thaw her icy fingers.

Her phone rang. Beth. "Kathy? How are you?"

"I'm all right. I made it to my car, and I'm starting to get warm. I'm wearing my warmest boots, but I'll need to tap dance to feel my toes."

Beth breathed a sigh of relief. "I've contacted everyone; we're all praying for you. I'm so sorry, Kathy, I tried to come get you, but I can't get out of the house."

"Don't worry about it," Kathy said. "Just stay safe where you are. Hopefully help will be here soon." Turning on the radio, she leaned back in her seat to wait. An hour passed, then another. Still no help. The storm was making it difficult to reach people; according to the news, the roads were blocked with snow, and even the rescuers were having to be rescued.

As the night wore on, Kathy fought to stay awake. Stepping from the car to ensure her tailpipe was snow-free, she looked up at the sky and prayed, "Abba, I'm scared and so tired. Please send me a Christmas miracle." However, as the night stretched into Christmas morning, help was no closer.

Would no one ever come?



Again, Kathy looked toward heaven. “Abba,” she begged, “please, please send help.” Maybe some Christmas music would lift her spirits. She turned up the radio, and an announcement caught her attention. “Grace Christian Church is now open as a storm shelter. We’re sending a rescue brigade of snowmobilers to round up stranded people and bring them to the church where there is plenty of food and blankets. If you’re in need, call 546-217-0821. We’ll get someone to you as soon as possible.”

Hands shaking, Kathy punched the number into her phone and told them where she was. A kind voice at the other end told her not to worry, she was only a few miles away from the church, and someone would be there soon. Hanging up the phone, Kathy looked up, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Thank You, Abba!”

Thirty minutes later, a snowmobile pulled to a stop next to her car. A snowman climbed off and used Kathy’s shovel to free her from the vehicle. “Ready to go?” he asked, smiling.

Nodding, Kathy left her car, her stiff legs causing her to stumble. Leaning on her rescuer, she climbed on the snowmobile and pressed her face against her rescuer’s back to block the wind. Her arms held tightly to his waist as they made their way back to the church. A lady welcomed her to the church, wrapped her in a blanket, and handed her a cup of hot tea.



As Kathy warmed up, she dialed a video call to her sister. “Beth? You’ll never guess where I am.”

“Not in your car, from what I can see.”

Kathy smiled, “I’m at Grace Christian Church.”

“How?” Beth’s eyes widened.

“Abba answered my prayer. I was losing hope this morning, feeling like I’d been abandoned. No sooner had I asked Him again for help than an announcement came over the radio about the church being able to open its doors. They sent a snowmobiler who rescued me and brought me to the church. Pausing, she looked around and gave silent thanks for where she was.

“Abba is so good, Beth. He gave me a Christmas miracle.”



Leone is an author who loves God, her family, and the American Revolution. She lives in Buffalo, NY with her husband Sean and their two cats.

Leone’s goal is to write children’s stories that show how our nation began and God’s role in making that happen. She also writes devotionals that share God’s faithfulness in her life, to encourage others to draw closer to Him and see His faithfulness in their lives.

You can see Leone’s devotional and article by visiting her author page on [Facebook](#). She’d love followers on [Instagram](#) and [X\(Twitter\)](#) as well.





*Therefore the Lord himself  
will give you a sign:  
The virgin will conceive  
and give birth to a son,  
and will call him  
Immanuel.*

Isaiah 7:14 NIV

# GRIEVING AT THE HOLIDAYS

By Kristine Zimmer Orkin



To most of us, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Year's Eve mean family, friends, food, and fun. Gift-giving, laughter, and celebration. However, for those who've lost a loved one, holidays can bring sadness, intense grief, even dread.

The first and second holiday seasons without their loved one can be especially difficult.

*Year One* is shrouded in magical thinking, hoping beyond hope that the nightmare will end and all will return to normal. All the senses are heightened as they begin to notice the seemingly non-important events of daily life that now take on new meaning and bring up buried memories.

*Year Two* is stripped of the numbness and fog surrounding the first year of grief. It brings the stark reality that a loved one is really gone.

Forever.

There begins an understanding of life moving forward without him/her and an even deeper heartbreak of the loss.

I'm well aware of holiday grief. I've lost my child, my husband, my parents, and very recently, my brother.

This year will be another first-year, grief-tainted season for our family.

A grief shared among many might make holidays somewhat easier.

- No one will be afraid to cry when the urge hits.
- No one looking away, embarrassed by the sight of mourning or not knowing how to help.
- Instead, we'll tear up occasionally with the one crying, and we'll wrap arms around each other in tight hugs of comfort and solidarity.
- We'll share memories of our brother. Heartfelt stories and funny family anecdotes.
- We'll find ways to laugh despite our sadness.
- We'll pray and give thanks for the life we shared with him, with the others we've lost, and for the blessings they brought us.

Sounds like a pretty great way to spend the holidays after a loss, right? Yet, the very thought of attending this gathering might be the last thing in the world my sister-in-law wants to do.

When I lost my husband, I prayed that I could sleep through the festivities of November and December.

That I could stay home, pull the shades, turn on some background noise, and speak to no one from Halloween until mid-January.

I didn't want a Christmas tree. No music about chestnuts roasting, angels singing, or Rudolph's red nose. No shopping. No wrapping or giving presents. No gifts given to me.

My parents and siblings lived two hours north of me. I didn't want to travel in the cold and snow. I didn't want to bake or to cook a contribution to the family meal. I didn't want to be with extended family or anyone else.

But I had children at home.

Two sons who needed normalcy. Needed and wanted to be with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. They needed to be part of the traditions and chaos of our large family.

So the boys and I put up a Christmas tree at home. We listened to Nat King Cole as we hung our favorite ornaments. Played "Silent Night" while we laid out our nativity scene. We shopped and bought gifts for each other. We remembered their dad, who passed away six months before, and told stories about his craziness and his kindness. We imagined our lives with their brother Jake, who would have just turned twenty.

And we drove two hours on snowy highways to attend the big family Christmas.

Being there was a blessing.

And a heartache.



Traditions are therapeutic. They provide stability and continuity, a sense of normal life. Opportunities to remember your loved one in conversations or activities they once participated in. A way to keep them included in the family.

Family holidays and traditions can also break your heart.

One less chair at the Thanksgiving table.  
One less smiling face in your family picture in front of the Christmas tree.  
One less gift to buy, give, and watch being unwrapped.  
One less thank-you hug and kiss.

Our family holidays include a new baby almost every year. Old and young take turns holding and cuddling the newborn. We take pictures of every expression the infant makes. Except the year my son was stillborn in October. There was no new baby to cuddle or fawn over that year. Instead, there were intermittent tears, quiet remarks of comfort, and awkward attempts to lighten the heaviness we all felt as numerous one- and two-year-olds ran around. My sister was pregnant.

The first holiday season, surviving spouses may notice, with glaring focus, the glut of family units around them.

They watch couples hold hands, sit together, or share a smile, a whisper, a kiss. They watch children scramble up to their mother or father, give them a quick hug, sit on their lap, or tattle on a sibling. They watch the faces of the parents as their offspring tear through elaborate wrapping to open gifts. They remember doing all those same things with their own spouse, only a year ago. How much they took for granted that many more Christmases would be just like the ones they're watching now.



Surviving children, especially older ones, notice the family dynamics of their cousins and friends and feel the loss of their parent deeply. They grieve then over the memories of their own relationship with a mother or father now gone.

Especially for the newly widowed, New Year's Eve can be a mixed bag of emotions. They may avoid partying with friends, not used to attending such celebrations alone. Missing a partner to kiss at midnight. Not ready to see the old year pass.

Saying hello to a new year means saying goodbye to the past, a past that spouse was part of.

Or the opposite might happen. Perhaps they need to be among people to celebrate the coming of a new year. It could be the catalyst for embracing being single. A fresh start. For some, it's the perfect time to move forward with life.

Whether the first year of loss or fifty years later, holidays can be challenging. But they are not the only celebratory events survivors face.

Every birthday (the loved one's, their own, and their children's), every anniversary, Valentine's Day, Easter, Fourth of July, anniversary of death, date of cancer diagnosis, first day of school—in fact, any day that was special to that family, are milestone holidays. They are remembered, respected in some way, and met with sadness.

Grief doesn't end. It signifies love for someone for whom there is no substitute. For the rest of a survivor's life, anything can trigger a grief response. At any time.

This is normal.

People who grieve, and those who love them, can do things to move the healing process forward, especially at holiday time. Here are things you'll find in many books on bereavement. I've added a few from my own personal experience.



### **FOR THOSE GRIEVING:**

- Holidays induce stress and high expectations. Be realistic this first year with what you are able and willing to do. Take care of yourself.
- You may want to celebrate the holidays with only a few close friends or family this year.
- Hang your loved one's stocking. Get a special ornament for your loved one.
- Visit the cemetery. Decorate your loved one's gravesite for the holidays. If you live in a winter climate, artificial flowers and evergreen swags last well until spring.
- Keep your family traditions. They're important, even if you don't realize it at this moment. Create new traditions, as well.
- If you have a holiday meal, bring/serve the loved one's favorite dish. Share the recipe so others remember him/her when they make it.
- Leave an empty chair at the holiday table the first year to commemorate your loved one.
- Say a prayer or have a moment of silence in your loved one's memory.

- Do something special in your loved one's name—donate to his/her favorite charity, serve food at a shelter, help other grieving people.
- Talk about your grief. Don't let anyone deny you that.

### FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS:

- Allow the bereaved person to talk about their loss.
- Ask questions to enable conversation and stories about the person who passed. Don't try to stop their crying—cry with them.
- Help grieving persons take care of themselves. If that means letting them skip the holidays this year, no matter how much you think you can comfort them, let them skip. If they come, don't expect them to bring a food contribution or gifts. They might do these things, but it also might take every ounce of their energy just to get out of the house and be among people.
- For holiday gatherings, make sure there is a safe, quiet place where the grieving person can go to be alone for a while.

### FOR ALL SURVIVORS and THEIR FAMILY/FRIENDS:

- Use the deceased loved one's name. Don't be afraid to say it. We who have lost someone are afraid of him/her being forgotten. Say the name. Don't let anyone forget.
- Faith is a powerful healer. Don't be afraid to express it, both privately and to others.



*God bless us all  
this holiday season.  
Wishing you peace,  
comfort, and grace.*



Kristine Zimmer Orkin is thrilled to share her work in “The Heart of Christmas 2023” collaboration. She writes and speaks on nonfiction stories, usually in memoir format. Kris has been a selected author in several anthologies, magazines (in the U.S. and U.K.), on guest blogs, and in speaker forums.

She is the proud mother of Joseph and Jonathan. Grateful grandmother of four. Always in her heart: beloved late husband, Philip Orkin (1954-2007), and middle son, Jacob Benjamin Orkin (1987).

Connect with Kristine on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).



# COMMUNITY CHRISTMAS GIFT

By Pamela Baker

Doreen sat on her hands and rocked toward the pew in front of her. She hadn't darkened a church doorway since her divorce three years ago. More people arrived, but nobody she knew. Connie, her best friend, had better return from the restroom before their number was called. She took slow breaths to calm her nerves.

Connie climbed over a family of four and plopped next to her. "Do you think we should have brought our kids?"

Their teenagers were into phones and friends too much to go anywhere with their moms. Doreen blew out a breath. "Nah. Let's see what it is first."

Connie glanced around. "Lots of families here. And we know it's big."

Since late September, from their adjoining backyards, they'd watched the members of this church build a massive outdoor structure.

A man wearing a beige, rope-belted, ankle-length tunic, his head covered with a drape of cloth tied on with twine, trotted onto the stage and spoke into a microphone. "Group Fourteen."

Connie bounced to her feet. "That's us."

Doreen's stomach roiled as she followed her friend and about fifteen others out to a hallway where a woman in costume adjusted her headscarf. Doreen flexed her clammy hands. Why was her body reacting? These people were too caught up in their performance to condemn her. She stood at the back of the crowd and caught only a little of the spiel, something about a census.

When the guide ushered them outside to a walkway, Doreen pulled her jacket tighter. Connie led her toward the front.

Clutching her head covering, the guide glanced toward a cluster of other actors, then addressed the crowd. "You'll be traveling to Israel at the time of Jesus's birth. You'll need someone to lead you through the city." She waved toward the actors. "Hannah, will you guide these pilgrims on their journey?"

A middle-aged woman in a drab green tunic and gray headwrap approached and raised an eyebrow. "I'll take them, but do they have enough money for the tax?"

Doreen fished the coin they'd given her out of her jeans pocket.

Connie leaned in and elbowed her in the side. "Now I get it."

Hannah brought them to a small wooden structure opposite a faux-iron gate.

An actor wearing a metal breastplate, a helmet with a brush-like plume, and sandals with knee-high lacings approached. "Halt!"

A child screamed.

The soldier held one palm out, and the other rested on a sword at his side. "All must pay their taxes."

A man dressed in a dark purple robe and an elaborate headpiece lounged in a large chair and asked Hannah for her taxes.

Hannah clutched her coin. "But I was saving this to offer to God."

The tax collector jumped to his feet. "Caesar is your god. But if you must be persuaded."

The soldier grabbed Hannah and placed his sword under her neck.

Hannah gasped. "We shall pay." She plunked a coin into the collection bowl.

Connie clutched Doreen's arm. Doreen rolled her eyes as they filed past and deposited their coins. "Did you notice Hannah had trouble keeping a straight face?"

Connie pulled her along as the guards opened the gates.

The group hung a left at the wooden wall painted to resemble stone. Hay crunched under their feet as they strolled past booths decorated as shops.

Hannah held a short conversation with the fish seller about how poor business was despite the crowds. Next, a baker hawked her bread.

Hannah shook her head. “No money.” She leaned in. “Doesn’t the Torah say that man shall not live on bread alone, but...”

“By every word from the mouth of God.” The baker set down the loaf. “Shalom.”

Doreen whispered to Connie. “Didn’t the fish seller greet us with Shalom?”

Connie shrugged.

Around that corner, a wine merchant hiccupped after her line.

Connie giggled. “An actor pretending to be drunk.”

Doreen stifled a laugh. They wound through the maze of colorful shops. Some of the merchants discussed the truths of God. Maybe more than she caught. The image of her dusty Bible tucked away on a shelf flashed into her mind. She blinked it away.

Connie “oohed” and “aahed” as they crowded into a square structure with pillars at the corners and a large chair in the center. A man in a robe and a shawl read from a scroll about a savior who would come from Bethlehem. Connie clasped her hand and squeezed it.

Doreen whispered, “Don’t get carried away. We’re here out of curiosity. Remember how church people treat divorcees.”

Connie furrowed her brow. “That’s why you stay away from church?”

She scoffed. “One reason.”

The group jostled them around the center open space to a brass and metal shop, then an inn.

The innkeeper stepped out. “Move on. Had I not given my stable to that young couple, I could have charged five shekels.”

“He’s talking about Mary and Joseph,” Connie whispered.

Doreen pursed her lips. “I know.” She trudged behind the group, gawking at the next pathway of shops, barely listening to the actors. At the end booth, she stooped and picked up a shard of pottery.







A woman sat at a potter's wheel. "I love my job. As God created us, I create beautiful things out of clay. Some of it breaks, but if I've done my job well, out comes a vessel fit to serve a king." Her smile radiated joy as she winked at Doreen.

Doreen's face warmed, and her eyes widened in recognition. The potter was an acquaintance who knew Doreen's story yet had always treated her with kindness and respect.

Connie dragged her through the blacksmith's shop to a stall with a camel. "Do you believe this?"

Her jaw dropped. "They found a camel in Georgia?"

Behind them, a couple brought out doves for the children to hold. "Shalom, travelers."

A little boy bounced toward the animal sellers. "Shalom." The crowd chimed in with the now familiar greeting.

Costumed youngsters with shepherd hooks led them out of the city. They crowded around a campfire, avoiding the smoke.

A bright spotlight illuminated a young man in a white robe. "Fear not, for I bring you great tidings..."

Connie leaned close. "Angels. And I thought this might be boring."



The shepherds guided them to a shed, where a young couple cradled an infant who gazed at his visitors with wide eyes.

"Oohs" and "aahs" echoed around the stall.

Hannah sang, "Oh come let us adore him."

Doreen sang along with everyone else as the words flooded back. She rubbed the goosebumps on her arms. "Oh God. I missed You. How could I let a couple of judgmental people keep me away?"

Hannah led them to an enclosed area with a painted landscape of a hill behind a single cross.

Doreen smiled through her tears. "I know this story."

Connie exhaled. "Me too. But it's good to be reminded, huh?"

Doreen clasped her hand over her heart and thanked God for his presence.

After the monologue about Jesus's return, Connie approached Hannah. "What does Shalom mean?"

Hannah smiled. "Peace."

Doreen let the feeling sink in as they followed their guide into a gym with round tables in the center, and long tables laden with cookies and hot chocolate lined up to the side.

Connie beamed. "This whole thing is amazing."

A woman wearing jeans and a tee shirt with "Walk Through Bethlehem" on it ushered them to the serving table. "It's our Christmas gift to the community." Her face lit up.

Doreen clasped the woman's hand in both of hers and gazed into her kind eyes. "Thank you." She accepted the hot chocolate and two star-shaped cookies and sat next to her friend and a few guests.

Connie waved a sugar cookie. "We're bringing the kids, and I'm telling all my friends."

Doreen nodded. "I might check out church on Sunday."

"Same." Connie held up her hot chocolate cup. "Merry Christmas."

Doreen bumped her cup against Connie's. "Shalom."



# SHALOM



Pamela Baker is a retired software engineer pursuing her calling to write fiction from a Biblical worldview. She also enjoys reading, performing in community theater, singing in her church choir, and traveling.

Recent short story publications include: “The New Student” in the Spring 2023 issue of Spark Flash Fiction, an online magazine, “Request for Protection” in Splashes of Hope, a compilation of short stories, and “The Noisy Neighbor” in the print anthology Stella’s Secret Sonata.

Book reviews are posted on [Instagram](#) and [Goodreads](#).

Short stories are available for free on her website <https://pamelagbaker.com/>

## Christmas Prayer

Be near me, Lord Jesus  
I ask Thee to stay  
Close by me forever  
And love me I pray.  
Bless all the dear children  
In Thy tender care  
And take us to heaven  
To live with Thee there.

Anonymous, Verse 3 of Away in a Manger

Dear Reader,  
Welcome to the Heart of Christmas e-zine. We write to honor God and to encourage readers with words of hope. With this collaboration, it's been our goal to support both seasoned and newer writers.

If you enjoy the content, follow author links for more information and inspiration.

Happy Reading! Merry Christmas!

*Elizabeth*

*Ruth*

*Geri*

*Leone*

*Sue*

*Cameron*

*Pam*

*Karen*

*Lynn*

*Cindy*

*Linda*

*Krisann*

*Judi*

*Laurie*

*Kris*

