

O Come Let Us Adore Him

Meditations on the
Advent Season
by the Asian Access
Community

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November 28 Advent in a Japanese Hospital

As the Advent season began one year ago I found myself in a six-bed room on the cancer ward of a Japanese public hospital. From my human perspective as a person who had enjoyed a previously healthy, hospital-free seventy years of life, it was an unlikely, unexpected, unwanted, unpleasant, unanticipated venue.

There was plenty of darkness in that room as each of my fellow-patients had been struck with the stopper of a cancer diagnosis calling for various measures of severe treatment with no guarantees on getting out of the black hole. It was definitely cause for reflection on the value and meaning of life.

I was the only one in the room who knew about Advent—the coming of Light into our dark world. My daily challenge was to shine that light in little ways by listening, comforting, encouraging, smiling and by small quiet acts of kindness and lots of prayer. That’s as far as I got with many of those coming and going in the room, but with a few I had strategic openings to share God’s Word directly and to introduce them more clearly to the Light.

The Advent of Jesus started in such an unlikely, unexpected, unwanted, unpleasant, unanticipated venue—his bed an animals’ feeding box in a dark, dreary, shabby, probably smelly, borrowed stable. What a shocking contrast after the splendors of heaven.

However, the entrance of Jesus into the world was perfectly timed, placed and purposeful according to God’s plan. From the poor shepherds who were the first to hear the Good News all the way to the rich kings from the East who followed a spectacular star, the light was piercing the darkness. Of course, there were those who did not recognize or receive the light, just as is true today.

However, our mission in this present world continues to be sharing the Light of Life wherever God places us—even if it’s a Japanese hospital room. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

God’s Word also assures us, “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

Dolores Dee Wirz

Missionary, Bible Study Ministries
Tokorozawa, Japan

November 29 Leaving Home

*Thou didst leave Thy throne
And Thy kingly crown,
When Thou camest to earth for me . . .*

“I love Christmas. I think that being in Japan at Christmastime helps me understand what Jesus coming here was like.”

At first I did not understand what Janice was trying to say. I was a young single missionary. It was going to be my first Christmas in Japan, and I was wondering how I was going to manage. Christmas had always been a special time with family celebrating the birth of Christ. How was I going to manage being alone, far away from those that I most wanted to spend that time with? This concern prompted me to ask Janice how her previous two Christmases in Japan had been. Her response puzzled me, so I asked her to explain.

“You know, it’s like Jesus. He left his home and came to a place where no one understood who he was. They looked at him and made assumptions. He was profoundly misunderstood. And yet he loved them, and sacrificed his own life for them.”

These words reverberated in my heart. Yes, Jesus did come like a wonderful present, a tiny package containing so much more than the initial glance reveals. But, it also marked the profound sacrifice of incarnation. Jesus left the perfect culture of heaven to enter our human culture that could barely (if at all) comprehend his mission, motivation, and identity. What they chose to see, was not who he really was. Even his own disciples would only “get it” after the fact.

This brief conversation set the framework for my Advent season that year (and many since). Yes, I did have moments when loneliness and the culture gap seemed overwhelming. I did wish that my family and friends were around the corner rather than half a world away. But, I

discovered the power of whispering, “My model is Jesus.” Any small perceived sacrifice in my life was as insignificant as a dust bunny next to the ultimate sacrifice of God-made-incarnate. After all, I was in Japan to love people and tell them about Jesus.

My first Christmas in Japan turned out to be a fantastic experience.

Thank you, Janice.

Do I enjoy Christmas in Japan? You bet! It helps me to understand Jesus better (see Phil. 2:5–7).

Jeffery Sonnenberg

Missionary

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November 30 Finding Him

I am a little embarrassed to admit it, but when I was in high school my friends and I would plan how to find boyfriends in time for Christmas. We never really succeeded. I laugh about it now but at that time we were very serious about who to spend the holiday with and how we might find him.

We weren't alone! Every year in the fall when Christmas begins to appear, young people throughout Japan start searching for a boyfriend or girlfriend. Even in this Buddhist and Shinto nation, Christmas atmosphere can be found everywhere, and earlier each year. Department stores play Christmas music; convenience stores advertise fancy Christmas cakes. Colonel Sanders puts on a Santa hat and sells Christmas chicken. It's a season for feeling uki uki, cheerful and merry.

But many young people think that to feel uki uki they need to find that special someone. Christmas is a day for dating. When Christmas draws close many young people feel extra urgency to find someone.

Throughout my youth and early twenties that's how I spent every holiday season, looking for a boyfriend—and as an unwelcome but necessary alternative, making party plans with friends. That was all I knew to do.

But then, in 2001, I was finally able to truly celebrate. That spring I had gone to church for the first time through the witness of my sister, Yuko. I believed much more quickly than many Japanese, and got baptized that September, at age 27. The holiday season became so much more meaningful. On Christmas Eve I got to celebrate the real meaning of the season for the very first time. My heart was full as I sang carols with friends.

Even now I remember that huge difference. I returned home that night with deep peace, not with unsatisfied hope that we are left with when we seek happiness in the world's ways.

Now every holiday season I wonder how many of my friends know the real meaning of Christmas. There are parties here and there, but people don't really know what to celebrate. What does God think of this, I wonder.

Luke 2:14 says, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

I pray that during this Christmas season many more Japanese people will learn the true meaning of the season, that they will find true peace through the One whose birth we celebrate.

Wakako Clark

Church Multiplication Missionary

Hokkaido, Japan

December 1 Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus

A crack in the sky appeared. A sliver of neon blue light poured out from it. It happened on the day of the annual sports festival at our son Owen's school, a highly anticipated and highly attended event in our community. The action on the sports field that afternoon was already in full swing. As the colors of the celestial display slowly morphed from bright blue to pink then to orange, more and more eyes turned heavenward until eventually all sports festival related activities had ceased.

My attention was diverted away from the amazing spectacle by the reactions of my fellow bystanders. Though we were all awestruck by the event, the people whose comments I heard fell into two divergent groups. Some were delighted, "How beautiful!" they exclaimed, while others shuddered, "I'm afraid."

As I stood there lost in my wonderment, I could not keep my self from asking, "Is this it?" Could this really be the day of our Lord's return as described in Matthew 24:30 and elsewhere, with Jesus appearing in the sky coming on the clouds in power and great glory. "Is this it?" Was this really it for the Japanese people? Would this be all the souls we will have to offer our Lord?

Despite the excitement and expectation of the moment I found myself hoping for more time. After ten minutes or so the light began to fade and with it the hope of flying in the air with my Lord that day. But what stuck was this renewed sense of urgency.

Just as the herald angel proclaimed it on that very first Christmas night, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11), so too must we continue to point the way toward our Savior Jesus for those who are still in need of rescue.

In this season of advent, as we look forward with great anticipation to the celebration of Christ's first coming, let it cause us to joyfully long for the imminent day of his return. And let it also serve to remind us of the grave task that remains before us all until then. For on that day there will surely be two very different groups of people: those for whom hope will be finally realized and those for whom all hope will be utterly lost.

Eric Takamoto

Church Multiplication Missionary

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December 2 Promises for the Future

“Do not be afraid, Zachariah; your prayer has been heard.”

“Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.”

“Do not be afraid (shepherds); I bring you tidings of great joy.”

“Do not be afraid, my child.” In the quietness of your heart can you hear God saying that to you, beloved one?

No words in scripture could have been timelier than these ones. After all, God had not spoken verbally to His people in 400 years. A high priest, a young girl and a group of humble sheep herders would need to hear “do not be afraid” when made aware that God was going to use them, in big ways and small, to unfold the greatest prophecy ever fulfilled.

I thought to myself—had the angels not spoken these words to them, what would they have assumed to be true about God’s heart for them in that moment? Would they have believed that God’s love was the forerunner to the appearance of the angels had they not been assured right then to lay their fears aside?

In the many years I have been a follower of Jesus, I have had times when I walked in silent fear of God’s plans for me and whether I would be able to fulfill any good work for Him. I have been doubtful that God could use someone as broken as I was, and been convinced that others could be used by Him in mighty and meaningful ways, but certainly not me.

Each Christmas, I have been drawn to the beautiful scriptures from the gospel of Luke, entitled Mary’s Song. It was here I found words from a kindred spirit in verse 48 to build my faith and trust in God: “For He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant” (Luke 1:48).

In Mary’s encounter with the angel who gave her the news that she had been chosen to bear the Christ child, God impressed upon Mary’s heart that He was graciously “mindful of her humble state.” He knew she was human and in need of His reassurance. He knew that she would be tempted to doubt and would need His strong arm to lean on. He saw the future for her and spoke His promise into His beloved daughter’s young soul. With these scriptures, I began to see that our faithful God is also mindful of our humble state as well. Jesus can speak into our fears and assure us that He is and always will be Immanuel, God with us.

As you enter this Advent season, I encourage you to step into the scriptures of Luke, chapter one. As you read, I pray that God will always assure you that He is graciously “mindful of your humble state” and is ready to always give you “grace to help in time of need.” May we all join together the Christmas season with Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds in the same praise of our God who loved us enough to send His Son to be our Savior! Merry Christmas to you!

Margaret Grieco

Assistant to the President

Torrance, California

December 3 Darkness and Light

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.

—Isaiah 9:2 (ESV)

“Ukemasu!” Hideko says to me after Bible study one day. “I’ll receive it!” In Japanese, often you’re expected to know the topic of the sentence without it actually being said.

I’m fairly sure I know what she means, but I repeat the word with a question in my voice just to make sure. “Ukemasu?”

“Yes!” she replies. “I’ll receive it! Baptism!”

Even though Hideko and her husband have been studying the Bible with me practically every week for months, Katsu hasn’t taken the step of faith yet. Hideko has been waiting patiently ever since she received Christ a couple of years ago, but she can’t wait any longer. She’s decided she wants to be baptized, and the sooner the better!

The weeks pass quickly, and now it’s Saturday. Tomorrow is the big day! As an added bonus, God has miraculously arranged the arrival of two of Hideko’s friends from America, the couple who first introduced her to the teachings of God’s Word. They’ve suddenly arrived in Tokyo to take care of some business, without even knowing Hideko’s baptism plans. In the past she had mentioned it would be nice if they could share this special day with her, and now in God’s perfect timing, here they are!

But there’s a problem. This evening a raging thunderstorm has plunged the Tokyo area into a tempest of broken branches and flying umbrellas. We don’t have a church building and Hideko’s baptism has been planned for a local river. We question whether we should venture out in such weather. Despite the arrival of Hideko’s friends,

should we postpone? Can we come up with an alternate plan? We don’t want to disappoint Hideko. She’s already waited so long for this day! Finally, we entrust it all to God in prayer and determine to go ahead with it somehow.

We fall asleep to the pounding of the rain on the roof tiles in the blustery darkness . . . and wake up to cloudless blue skies and the dazzling light of the rising sun.

Darkness and light. God uses this imagery throughout Scripture. Our opening verse from the Book of Isaiah is often quoted during the Christmas season. It points to the coming of the Christ Child, who announced when he reached adulthood, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” John 8:12 (ESV).

On Hideko’s special weekend, God has graphically reminded us once again of the transformation that takes place when darkness is overcome by light.

Prayer

“Father, thank you for sending your Light into the world to show us the way. Help me be a light to those walking in darkness all around me today. Amen.”

Gary Bauman

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December 4 Music at Christmas

One of the most delightful aspects of the Christmas season is the musical lilt of Christmas carols in many places: in our church services, in the shopping malls, on the radio, in television specials, piped to us through our technological gadgetry, and sung in neighborhoods by traveling caroling choirs. One year when I was in high school my mother thought of an interesting way to carol sing at the homes of our friends and family.

My father was a musician. He was the local high school band master. He had taught all of his children to play several instruments. My mother proposed that unlike previous years, we carol for our friends this year with our instruments, rather than by voice. We numbered 5 persons in the family: Dad would play the oboe; mother would play a clarinet (first and last time I ever saw my mother play a clarinet); I would play the saxophone; my sisters would play flute and clarinet respectively.

We started out on the appointed night just after darkness had settled in. It was a brisk, cold night air. At each home we would park the car a little distance from the house so as to not reveal our presence too early. Then, with music instruments in hand we would quietly set up our music stands and sheet music on the lawn near the front door and begin our carol serenade. Since we were using wind instruments, at some homes we were not easily heard inside the house, and we were obliged to ring the bell and then hustle back to the musicians' line to quickly get into the carol. But the surprised, happy responses of our hearers, once they arrived out on their porches, was most satisfying. I still remember that caroling evening as one of the most fun experiences we ever shared as a family.

Last summer I happened to be with my best friend from those high school years. He was recalling boyhood experiences, and told me that

the night we came caroling with our instruments to his home that year was most comforting and meaningful for him. As a young boy his father had died of a heart attack, and now their Christmas holidays lacked his presence. Our visit to their home that Christmas strangely refreshed him in the kindred love of friends and the Heavenly Father whose coming in the person of the Son has set men's hearts to singing from generation to generation.

“At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God’s praises, Glory to God in the heavenly heights,

Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.”

—Luke 2: 13, 14 (MSG)

May God use each of this season—perhaps in ways we may never realize—to bring His hope and refreshment to others.

Missionary C.

Restricted Access Country, Asia

December 5 He's Come All this Way

*For to us a child is born . . . And he will be called Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

—Isaiah 9:6

Sometimes I wonder if I break God's heart all day, every day. And not because I'm doing something wrong, something bad. But he sees how I pretend to be busy with the cookies at the side of the register, so I can avoid looking directly at the clerk, who is too handsome for me to look at.

And if I were God, and I saw my kid, and how frightened she sometimes was I'd be pretty heartbroken. But then again if I were God, and I could see the clear, sharp pieces of joy that sometimes intersect through the flatness, wouldn't I be that much more precious to him?

Some things God loves about me: the scrap cloth that keeps my place in books, my chipped nail polish, the way I smell after a day at the beach, my quietness. And it makes me feel like a treasure, and he would say it slow like this; ah- tre- jah.

But he must have been awfully worried, because he came all the way to see me. I'm not really sure why he did it the way he did. Why he had to be born and why he had to have a mother, but that's the way it happened.

I guess in part he wants me to know that he gets it, the whole awkwardly alive-thing. And even though I know that's probably not the deepest or even most important reason, I'm okay with just that.

December days are thin like eggshells. It's like I can feel God's heart-break and love for me, clear through the soft sunshine. I'm going to try and be less afraid this winter season. I'll at least give it a try. It's the least I can do, since God's come all this way to meet me here again.

Nozomi Imanishi

Church Planting Associate

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December 6 The First Christmas in Post-Cyclone Nargis

Cyclone Nargis hit the southern parts of Myanmar on 2nd May 2008, with winds of 215 km per hour which blew overnight, and floods 12 feet high, causing massive loss of lives, livelihood and devastation. It affected 2.4 million people with 230,000 casualties in the Delta region. The Methodist Committee on Relief (MCOR) went in with immediate food and relief, focusing on five villages. Clergy and lay members of the Methodist Churches pitched in to support the villagers with disaster relief and livelihood rehabilitation.

Come December 2008, most of us in the ministry were feeling exhausted with the workload of the demanding task of the rehabilitation work required of us in the Delta villages as well as our churches preparing for Christmas. However, we realized that the villagers who had lost their family members to the Cyclone would soon be facing their first Christmas since their losses. They would need our love more than ever.

So, despite heavy schedules, a team of us left for the Delta on the evening of the 25th December, 2008. Sein Yati is a village near the Bay of Bengal, and had lost half of its population because of the cyclone. We arrived early in the morning after a twelve-hour boat-ride with our band equipment, generator for lighting up the stage, costumes and presents.

The seminary students with us were trained in grief counseling and went from house to house, listening to the villagers as they shared about that night when the Nargis cyclone blew away their homes. The villagers cried over the loss of their loved ones. The youth distributed Christmas gifts, sharing with the villagers about God's love. In the evening, a makeshift stage was set up in the paddy field and the band played. There was singing and dramas about God's love, and our youth also presented the contextualized "Nativity" about the birth of

Jesus in Myanmar costumes with a script from the Burmese Bible. The Gospel of Jesus was preached to nearly 1000 people who gathered in that field.

The next day, as we were about to leave for other villages, we visited the pastor's home to discuss the needs of the village. While we were talking we saw a young teenage girl sitting quietly in a corner just listening to us. She had a lost and forlorn look in her eyes and we asked for her name. The Pastor explained that this is his niece Eh Phaw, and that that this teenage had nowhere to go as she had lost both parents and one younger brother in the cyclone.

Tears started to roll down her cheeks when we asked about the night of the storm. My wife and I hugged her and told her about Jesus Christ and His salvation; that in Him we have hope. We led her to release those who have passed away—since they are believers they are with the Lord. We simply said we love her and Jesus loves her too. When asked whether she wanted us to pray for her she said yes, and we did so.

At that moment after the prayer we could see the lifting up of her head with a radiant smile as she wiped her tears and walked with us to our boat. We waved till we could not see her as our boat moved off from the shore. My wife Caroline and I smiled to each other and felt the warm glow in our hearts—this is the reason for the season. We celebrate Jesus who loves us and came down to save us—all of us. The Cyclone Nargis had brought new meaning to His incarnation and salvation and opened doors for our new ministry in the Delta.

* **BZM, Honorary National Director**

A2 Country name withheld

December 7 The Paintbrush Christmas

Images of Christmas fill our thoughts: red and green decorations hanging in store windows, a tree trimmed with sparkly ornaments, family coming from near and far to share presents, good food, and cold weather. The only uncertainty in this ideal picture is what will the presents be under the tree, and how long to cook the turkey. But what happens when we have none of these things that we so readily associate with Christmas? When life seems more full of uncertainty than sweet traditions?

Two years ago, we had a taste of that. December found us in the midst of packing boxes of homeschooling supplies and suitcases of summer clothes, as we got ready to leave snowy Arkansas and head to tropical Singapore. We were on our way there to start a new ministry assignment for my husband's role helping train Asian pastors. We had planned on leaving in June, but the date kept getting pushed back while we waited for the Singapore government to approve Stu's work permit. No word in August, September, October, November, or even December. We had been assured it would come by December, so on faith we booked a flight December 9th and headed overseas to our new home.

We arrived and were staying at a small guest apartment with a borrowed hot plate and our luggage and boxes as make-shift tables. The next day we started looking for an apartment in this city-state of 4 million people. Day after day we came home dripping with sweat after looking at seemingly dozens of apartments all over the island. They were either too small, too pricey, too old, or too far from public transit. When at last we found the perfect spot, our hopes were dashed when the owner kept raising the asking price and giving us the runaround. December 23 found us still looking for a home, and needing to move soon to make room in the guest apartment for the next visitor.

The day before Christmas Eve we finally found an apartment that we all liked and that met all of our needs (okay, so no pool, but I guess that wasn't really a need). We rejoiced to get the keys that night. So Christmas Day was spent painting and fixing the place up in order to move in the next day.

Yet amidst all the uncertainty, God kept assuring us that He was in charge. The very same day we landed in Singapore, Stu's work permit was approved. When we landed at the airport, people we had never met picked us up with all our things—at 1 o'clock in the morning! And God prepared friends for us who helped us paint, invited us into their homes and helped us so much during those first few weeks and beyond.

God reminded us through the Paintbrush Christmas that while all the traditions may bring comfort and familiarity, God is our true comfort and certainty.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

—Psalm 46:1

Hilary Lynch

Missionary

Singapore

December 8 Christmas—A Time for the Humble

Why would God choose Mary, a young inexperienced, unmarried peasant girl from a rural village, to be the mother of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ? Mary answers this question in the opening lines of her song: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant” (Luke 1:46–48). A little further on Mary builds on her theme of God’s attention being drawn to those who are humble in spirit.

“He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble” (Luke 1:51–52). Interestingly, I went on to discover that this testimony of Mary reflects the character and purposes of God as they always have been. The prophet Isaiah affirms this truth: “This is what the Lord says: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite [meaning crushed] and lowly in spirit . . .’” (Isaiah 57:15). And: ‘This is what the Lord says: “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word”’ (Isaiah 66:2).

This theme continues right through the Bible and is brought home to us forcefully by James and Peter where they quote Proverbs 3:34: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” It seems that God even picks a fight with those who are proud! (See James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5). Jesus not only taught this truth (Matthew 23:12), but he modeled this attitude for all to see (Philippians 2:5–11).

In Mary’s life and song of praise in the first chapter of Luke we gain insight into the life of a humble person.

1. Unconditional obedience to God (v. 38)
2. A life lived for the glory of God (v. 46–47)

3. A fear of God (v. 50) (see also Psalm 25:1)

4. A hunger for God (v. 53)

Mary “found favour with God” (v. 28, 30) because of her humble spirit. Her humility attracted the presence of God. God took the initiative to seek her out and she was amazed that she could attract His attention.

When you enter into the spirit of Christmas this year, remember that Christmas is a time for the humble. Take time to ponder anew on this remarkable truth in light of the spirit of the world around you.

God hasn’t changed. That is why He is still dispatching His angels to tell those that are humble of heart, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (v. 35) and, like Mary, you will become pregnant with the purposes of God.

And when His angel comes, you are to answer, “I am the Lord’s servant . . . May it be to me as you have said” (v. 38).

Christmas is a time for the humble of heart.

Rod Denton

Asian Access Senior Lecturer

Australia

December 9 Christmas Lights

What do you think of when you see Christmas lights? Growing up in a pastor's family, Christmas time was always very busy with my dad preaching, and my mom directing the Christmas program. Our family also hosted a large Christmas Day gathering for church members who did not have family in the US or in the area.

In preparation for our numerous guests and the season, my siblings and I would dust off Christmas decoration boxes with my mom to make our home more festive, but my favorite moment was seeing the lights turn on to light up the Christmas tree. When it was time for bed, I'd stare at the flickering lights of the tree through the slats of the stairway while the rest of the house was dark and quiet. I was entranced. Oh how I loved these serene moments in the midst of the busy season.

As I moved from childhood to adolescence and then college, the wonderment of Christmas decorating seemed to fade. I preferred to go out with my friends, than get "stuck" with the task or felt it was a bother. My mom continued the tradition, sometimes on her own, and sometimes with help.

Two years ago, my mom called my husband and I over to their place with a simple request. My parents had moved into a small pastor's retirement community, and she wanted help putting up Christmas decorations, but specifically needed help with the Christmas lights.

That year was particularly different. My mom was in a much weakened state from chemotherapy treatment for stomach cancer, and suffered from some very severe side effects which mimicked Parkinson's disease. My mom's shaky hands could not stabilize to do any fine motor function, and this frustrated her normally independent self.

My husband diligently hung the Christmas lights and the Star of David patiently to my mom's liking, and I draped some choice ornaments on to a small tree. When the Christmas light switch turned on, her vacuous look dissipated and it reflected the glow from the lights.

I drove home that night in tears. The simple tradition of Christmas lights took on new meaning for me that year. We were not decorating for the large Christmas party my parents hosted in the past, and the frenzy of the season was minimal in their retirement years. It was not a burden or chore. The lights and decoration symbolized a celebration of the coming of our Lord in the midst of deep hardship for her, and the rest of the family. She wanted to celebrate Jesus.

After they (Magi) had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was . . . On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.

—Matt. 2:9–11a

The lights and the bright Star of David flickering in my parents' house assured me of God's promise and presence for me personally in the stillness of the night. Just like my childhood, it's in those quiet moments when we pause, and in the Christmas story, where the Magi come, can we block out the din to commune and be with Jesus.

Emi Hibino Miller

Asian Access HRD & Member Care

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December 10 Call His Name “Jesus”

This past August, I had the opportunity to go back to the US to visit with my family and friends. My Japanese students and friends knew that I was especially looking forward to the birth of my second great nephew. My niece gave birth on August fifth and less than two weeks later, my mom and I were able to visit my niece’s family and hold the baby. There’s something so special about seeing and holding a newborn baby. We realize once again the miracle of life and the special gift that it is.

Upon my return to Japan I shared the highlights of my time in the US. As I shared about how wonderful it was to see my great nephew and hold him, one of my language helpers asked me what his name is. “Caleb,” I replied. Immediately she asked me what Caleb means. “Um, well . . . hmmm . . .” was all I could say. I was totally unprepared to tell the meaning of his name, even though I knew that the meaning of names is important in Japan. After giving an explanation of Caleb from the Old Testament, I told her that I’d look up the name to see what it means. I found out later that it means “whole-hearted.”

Christmas is a time to ponder and celebrate the birth of Jesus. When the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, he said, “. . . and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Jesus—the LORD saves. Joseph knew not only what to call his son, but also the meaning of his son’s name.

Matthew goes on to say that Jesus’ birth would fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah which were, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

As Christmas comes, we have the privilege of sharing about the birth of a beautiful baby boy. A unique baby—unlike any other ever born.

Immanuel—God with us, Jesus—the One who saves us from our sins!

As we share this wonderful news with others, let’s pray that God will cause them to want to know more. I know I’m hoping for someone to ask me, “What does the name ‘Jesus’ mean?” Yeah! I’m ready to answer this one!

Mary Raver

Church Multiplication Missionary

Sanda, Japan

December 11 Roller Coaster Transitions

*He came from Heaven to Earth, to show the way,
From the Earth to the Cross, My debt to pay.
From the Cross to the Grave, From the Grave to the Sky,
Lord, I lift your name on High . . .*

Have you ever moved? Across town? To a new state? A new country? There is adventure and excitement in each move yet there is also loss and change . . . all part of transitions.

Transition is the period of time when you are preparing to move, actually moving and then readjusting to your new place. According to Dave Pollock a normal transition process is like crossing a bridge. You start with settled, move to unsettling, then to chaos, re-settling and settled. During all of these stages you experience physical, emotional and potentially spiritual stress. With change of any sort, stress is bound to follow. How do we deal with this transitional stress?

God has called my family to live and serve Him in Japan. That means dealing with all of these stages of transition when we move between countries or even to a new city in Japan. In preparing for our transition back to Japan after a long home assignment, I thought, "Who in their right mind would willingly go through chaos?" That would be my family and many others who move around the world for the sake of God's call on their lives.

When I was a child riding a roller coaster at Knott's Berry Farm, I was sitting with Dad and holding on for dear life. I knew my dad wouldn't let me get hurt even though I was scared and didn't know what to expect. This was the picture God reminded me of when preparing for our transition. Of course, my earthly family can't protect me and hold me through this, but I know my Heavenly Father is holding onto me and I can hold onto Him. He loves me. He loves you. Sometimes the

roller coaster is more like the Matterhorn and you can see what to expect. Other times it's like Space Mountain where you don't know when the twists, ups and downs come, but either way I know the One I can hold on to for the ride. (I just wish I liked roller coasters!)

Jesus Christ made the ultimate transition from Heaven to Earth. He left a comfortable, predictable, beautiful place for earth. He understands how to navigate the transitional stress. He knows the big picture. He came as a human baby from a heavenly body. He certainly knows what it is like to move. And He did it to save all of us from eternal separation from God. If He can do it, then I know He will help our family in Japan. He wants more Japanese people to experience His love, hope, peace and joy. His salvation. That is what it is all about. Is it easy? Not usually. Is it fun? Sometimes. Is it rewarding? Always. Is it worth it? Most definitely.

Thank you Lord Jesus for paving the way and for showing us how to step out of what is known and comfortable for the sake of the call. Thank you for letting us hold onto You for this roller coaster of life, with all of its ups and downs. Thank you for holding on tight to us.

In Jesus' Name,

Amen.

Rhonda Boehme

Japan Church Multiplication Missionary

December 12 The Opportunities of Consumerism

For the past twenty-two years, I have watched from afar as stores in the west reframe the message of Christmas to be one of consumerism and Santa. Increasingly, department stores in Japan are embracing December 25th as a time to give gifts, and hence sell more stuff. As of late, I can't think of a store in Japan, from the mom and pop grocery stores to the massive chains, that do not in some way join in the Santa celebration.

And I love it! Each December, everywhere I go, I see and hear a proclamation of Christmas. Stores play traditional, Christ-centered Christmas Carols, trees are in all the displays, and Christmas cakes (from our European friends) are sold everywhere. Each instance is an open door for believers in Japan to share the story of Jesus Christ.

As we look at the beautifully decorated trees, all I need to get things going is ask a simple question. "See the star on the top of the tree, do you know why people put stars there?" "The silver and gold trimmings are beautiful, aren't they? Do you know why people decorate with silver and gold?" Off we go!

Or as "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" rings out through a store, it is easy to say, "Oh, I love this song. This is what it means in Japanese . . ." Really, could things get much simpler?

I agree that consumerism runs rampant, but I also see an amazing opportunity to lovingly share the Good News of Jesus each Christmas. Just as the angels appeared to the shepherds keeping watch in their fields and heralded the good news, we too share in the joy of being proclaimers. A number of times I have had people say to me, "Wow, I've never heard the Christmas story before, this is the first time. Thanks." What a thrill it is to hear this!

I count the department stores as friends each Christmas. Not only do they remind me of the joy of Christmas and the coming of Jesus, they partner with me to proclaim with me the good news of our Savior's birth. How amazing is that!

Merry Christmas!

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

—Luke 2:10, 11

Peter Thomson

Church Multiplication Missionary

Sanda, Japan

December 13 Paradigm Shifts

Christmas in Japan is one of the busiest times of year for Asian Access missionaries. It is the season when Japanese are the most open to hearing the Gospel because of their interest in Christmas and its origin.

Several years ago I began praying with a Japanese Christian friend about teaching a special Christmas English Bible study and craft class for non-Christian women in our community. We were excited as fifteen ladies came to the four weeks of study. We made snowmen out of baby socks, cloth wreaths, and read and studied about the first-ever real Christmas.

The second week we read Luke 2:1–7: Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem because of the census . . . Mary needing to deliver a baby . . . and no room in any hotels, so they delivered the baby in a manger. A story most of us have heard so many times.

Near the end of the study that morning, the ladies shared with a partner what they've learned. As I walked around the room, I noticed my neighbor friend Naomi had tears in her eyes. She shared with her partner and me that she had always had an image of God as a tyrant, who tells people to go here or go there, to go to heaven or hell. Hearing this story, she was so touched to realize that her image of God was wrong. That God became human just like us . . . with an incredibly normal birth . . . that Jesus actually was a little baby, born in a dirty stable. She said, "this changes everything I thought about God."

God became like us, and knows all about the ins and outs of daily life. This is the beauty of the incarnation, isn't it? Our favorite ministry verse is John 1:14: "The Word became flesh, and moved into the neighborhood." Hallelujah for a Savior born as a baby who knows what it's like to move into this world, with all of its challenges, joys,

and sorrows. He understands the ins and outs of friendship, rejection, stressors, family challenges. He abides with us through these things. Hallelujah for such always-ness and constant, steadfast love.

Madeline L'Engle writes: "I will have nothing to do with a God who cares only occasionally. I need a God who is with us always, everywhere, in the deepest depths as well as the highest heights. It is when things go wrong, when good things do not happen, when our prayers seem to have been lost, that God is most present."

The Incarnation is a celebration of this reality—the presence of God coming to us. And staying with us through thick and thin. As Naomi and these ladies have been finding out, and as you and I know—truly, knowing the Incarnate Jesus changes everything.

Sue Plumb Takamoto

Church Multiplication Missionary

Sanda, Japan

December 14 Making Room for Jesus

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

—Luke 2:6–7

When I was 6 years old, my parents moved from Lansing, Michigan to Lodi, California—away from grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. Although we left our natural family, the Lord blessed us with a new spiritual family.

We started attending a church soon after moving to Lodi, and the Lord blessed us with even more “grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins.” It fills me with gratitude when I think about all of the people who opened their hearts and homes to us, making us feel loved and welcomed.

There was another family that left their family behind too. Mary and Joseph had to leave their extended families to go to Bethlehem. When they finally arrived, there was no room for them due to the census. Although all of the inns were crowded, one innkeeper gave Mary and Joseph the room that he did have—probably the place where the animals were kept since Jesus was placed in a manger. I am glad that anonymous innkeeper opened his heart to the plight of this young couple and provided a room so Jesus could be born.

I am filled with gratitude as I think about your willingness to open your homes and hearts to our missionaries. Many of you have hosted missionaries home on furlough, or hosted events at your churches so that they could share about what God is doing in the world. I know that they are grateful and blessed by the hospitality you extend to them. Not only are you opening your hearts to them, you are opening your hearts to Jesus. Thank you for making room for Jesus.

Silk Handley
Torrance, CA

December 15 Light of the World

I remember well the holiday season of 1990. I was living in Japan, experiencing Christmas far from Oregon for the first time.

I felt the 5000-mile distance most when I thought of Portland's Peacock Lane, where each of the century-old homes is decked out with elaborate light displays every year. It was a stark contrast to what I saw in Tokyo where Christmas decorations were few and very far between, and Christmas lights couldn't be seen anywhere.

I mentioned the lack of lights to friends in my English classes at Machida Grace Chapel. One responded that there were probably some at a certain "mission school," a university with Christian roots, just one stop down the Odakyu train line. So we made a plan and went.

We took the train to Tamagawagakuenmae Station and found the campus. But we weren't sure if the guard at the gate would try to stop us from entering. "You go first, Tim," someone said. "While the guard is trying to think of how to say, 'don't come here' in English we'll follow you onto campus. Walk quickly and don't look back." It worked. We got on. And we found the lights.

We found the one tree that was decorated with very few, sparsely distributed lights.

While my friends commented on how beautiful the tree was I was privately having one of many "just keep smiling" moments, trying to maintain a friendly face while thinking, "This is it?! One tree? With a handful of lights?!" It was disappointing, but not surprising in a place where so few knew the Light of the World Whose birth we were celebrating.

Many things have changed in Japan in the two decades since then. Christmas decorations are everywhere! Here in Sapporo, Odori Park

in the middle of town displays its "winter illuminations" in time for Christmas, and leaves them up through the snow festival in February. It's one of the most beautiful light displays I've ever seen.

Christmas lights have become common, but the One whose birth we celebrate is still unknown. Holiday decorations and celebrations remain void of visible signs of Jesus. Even so, I trust He is present. I choose to believe that far more deeply than we can see, the Light of the World is at work in the dark places of society and individuals' hearts.

Hebrews 11:1 tells us that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

This Christmas may Jesus give us increased conviction that He is powerfully at work in Japan, far beyond what we can see. Let's believe that in 2011 much more of His unseen work will become visible as Japanese people in unprecedented numbers respond to Him who is the Light of the World.

Tim Clark

Regional Coordinator, Church Multiplication
Hokkaido, Japan

December 16 Christmas in Nepal: History in the Making

In Nepal, festivals happen almost every week. Each ethnic group has its own festival celebrations in homes, temples and public places.

Twenty years ago, being a Christian in Nepal was illegal. So Christmas was not much known, although for sake of tourists, some hotels and restaurants might have decorated with Christmas trees or Santa Claus, and offered special foods. It was generally known only to a limited number of Nepalese people, though.

After 1990, a multiparty system in the government was introduced, allowing for a little more freedom in practicing one's own religion but not in converting others. The Christmas celebration took another form among Christian churches. Each church or group of combined congregations participated in Christmas caroling in market places and hotels, distributing gospel tracts and preaching. On Christmas day, many non-Christian friends and relatives were invited to the church where for the first time people would hear the real meaning of Christmas.

Singing, dances, dramas, decorating buildings and homes are all cultural parts of Nepali society. So Christians have contextualized all these forms to communicate the Truth to our people.

In 2008, the Christian Advisory Committee for writing a new constitution in Nepal was formed to represent Christian concerns to the government. Sundar, my husband, is the chairperson leading it. For the first time in history, a huge Christmas program was held for various country leaders in the International Hall (where the current Assembly meets). The whole program was telecast across many television channels. The following year, in 2009, Nepal declared Christmas a national holiday. During the Christmas program, the President, House Speaker and other leaders joined to celebrate Christmas and

it was again telecast live. The week leading up to Christmas, many new celebrations occurred, such as blood donations, a tea party with Prime Minister and Constituent Assembly members (that I hosted), and a motorcycle rally.

It is amazing! We used to celebrate with fear, but now we are openly preaching that Christ was born to die for the salvation of all humankind! The message we gladly spread now at the Christmas season is this: Christ came to reconcile the broken relationship with sin between God and man. Christ was born to die to give life. Through His death, we are reconciled to God, now we can have reconciliation, peace with God, man to man and man to nature. This is a message that the people of Nepal very much need to hear!

On Christmas Eve, carol singing teams—mostly young people—come to our house. We keep the door open so that anyone walking in the street can enter. We make a bonfire and sing. Our sons and their friends stand at the gate and hand out Gospel tracts to the people passing by. Sometimes they have to explain it to them. Then we have a feast. On Christmas day, most churches invite many friends to come and hear the true meaning of Christmas. We encourage believers to share clothes and money with others who have less. Believers collect money and send it to homes for children to have a special dinner.

Our entire motto is that: “. . . somehow Christ must be preached . . . through any means” (Phil. 1:18). Christmas is a wonderful opportunity to do this. Let's not miss out on what God wants this year!

Sareeta Thaapa
Country Director
Nepal

I don't remember my first Christmas, being that I was only six weeks old. But it was one of significance for my family. And lately, as challenges have come my way, I've been recalling the lessons my family learned during that time.

Every year my parents would drive the 1000 miles from Seattle to Dinuba, California in the San Joaquin Valley to spend the holidays with relatives. The Christmas of 1966 was the first time I would meet my extended family and my grandmother, in particular, was looking forward to our arrival. Though she did not talk openly about it, Grandma knew she was dying of heart disease and exhibited great determination to see her youngest grandchild before passing on. She had a reason beyond the usual.

That year my parents had been building their "dream" house, working closely with the architect to think through every material, every detail. The house was just days from being finished and most belongings had been moved into the new home when a stranger with mental problems burned the house to the ground.

Of course my parents were stunned by this setback. They lost the house, many of their possessions (including photos), and were wrapped up in legal wranglings. Grandma feared for the health of my mom as she was five months pregnant at the time. She also worried that this trauma would somehow leave a mark on the baby. Hence, she determined to stay alive to see me with her own eyes, if she could.

As Christmas approaches, I turn to the story of the annunciation to read Mary's response when the angel Gabriel reveals she will give birth to the Savior of the world. In an instant, Mary's life path veers from any she might have imagined. And yet, when God intrudes into her life, Mary welcomes his coming with joy, calling herself blessed.

Again and again throughout her life, Mary's faithfulness requires complete trust in a heavenly Father who is good and loving despite the pain obedience demands.

I see that same faith in my parents. They never talk about the house fire or other challenging times without mentioning the many blessings that followed. Grandma needn't have worried. Foundational to their faith is the knowledge that our God can be trusted.

In my life, God has repeatedly proved himself good, loving, and merciful. He has never failed to provide every necessary thing, for he has great plans and nothing is impossible with him. Even when things are tough, when ministry doesn't go as planned, when God changes the course of my plans, I have the rock-solid truth to stand on that God is Sovereign. And I can answer as Mary did, "Let it be with me just as you say."

Two days after my grandmother first held me, she went to be with Jesus. I hope that as she looked upon me, she was assured that God is in control and He is worthy of our trust.

Wendi Thomson

Church Multiplication Missionary

Sanda, Japan

December 18 It's Not about the Food

It was December 25, 2005, and I was living alone in Japan. This was my first Christmas away from my family. Luckily for me it was a Sunday, which meant I had a full day with Sunday worship, lunch afterwards, and then some of my afternoon spent with responsibilities around the church. The problem was I was still going to spend Christmas evening alone at my apartment or, if I got adventurous, at Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Two of my Japanese teammates knew that Christmas was an important time for American families to come together and were concerned that I would be lonely. Knowing I would most likely be home alone, they took me out to dinner at a local restaurant.

The fried pork we ate was not amazing and the iced tea from the drink fountain did not quite taste like home. I had trouble communicating with the people sitting across from me and, truth be told, the restaurant could have been described as a low-end Denny's. That said, I had a great Christmas.

Acts 2:42 says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Looking back on the Christmas of 2005, I am reminded of Acts 2:42 and the fellowship of the early church. Sharing a meal at a key time is one of the most powerful things we can do as Christians. I encourage you this Christmas to consider if there is anyone you can share Christmas with who may be spending it alone. It can make a huge difference!

Prayer

Thank you, God, for the significance of following your example in sharing bread and fellowship together. Make my heart open this season to those who may need such encouragement. Amen.

Robert Adair

Short-Term Missions Recruiter

Wheaton, Illinois

December 19 The Privilege of Participation

The image of the young Mary being interrupted in the course of her day by a heavenly invitation to bear God's son is one of my favorite parts of the Christmas story. I am always amazed to consider how this young girl so completely trusted God and seemingly gave little thought to her personal future and planned engagement. She seemed so ready to say "yes" without hesitation to God and to this amazing proposition.

Mary stands in stark contrast to the first woman, Eve, who, through the serpent's deception, took the first step of human disobedience. In my mind these two women stand as bookends, one representing human fallenness, the other reflecting God's grace in allowing us to participate in his divine plan of redemption. Though I experience my fallenness as a daughter of Eve on a daily basis, I am also challenged by Mary's heart of sincere devotion. I likewise desire to quickly respond to God's call with a heartfelt "yes!"

Amazingly, God continues to invite us to participate in his divine plan of redemption. It has been my privilege to offer his redemption to my Japanese neighbors who have questions about eternity, or my friend whose mother-in-law gave her permission to consider the Christian God. The Holy Spirit has been preparing them and continues to draw them, but along the way he lets me take part in the process. I sense Mary's joy when she sang, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant . . . for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name" (Luke 1:46).

Mary's heart is full of gratitude that God chose her to bring the Savior into the world. I am also deeply grateful for the privilege he has given me to bring Jesus to Chikako and Tamiko and others. So the Christmas story not only speaks to me of the young Mary's role in

God's grand plan of salvation, but my part as well. I pray I can especially be ready to notice the divine opportunities he brings into my day and respond promptly, "I am the Lord's servant." It is in these moments that we experience the miracle of Christmas and are filled with joy for the privilege it is.

Mary Jo Wilson

Church Multiplication Missionary for Japan
Monrovia, CA

The angel said, “Don’t be afraid. I’m here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David’s town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you’re to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.

—Luke 2:10–12 (MSG)

Becoming a missionary in a foreign land has surely deepened my appreciation of the incarnation of Christ.

But wait a minute . . . This was the arrival sign of the world’s Savior—a baby wrapped in a blanket lying in an animal’s food trough? Messiah and Master arriving as an infant?

I moved into this new world of Japan with some knowledge of how to survive here. I was not a helpless baby, but I sure felt like one. I struggled in almost everything. I struggled to learn how to speak a new language. No matter how I tried, I didn’t understand what people were saying. I could not communicate much at all. I needed to acquire a taste for a different style of food. I grieved to exchange my self-sufficiency in America for reliance upon my new hosts. My neighbor had to teach me how to turn on my rice cooker!

How was I supposed to be a communicator of the Gospel message from a position of weakness? The connection between weakness and grace had not crossed my mind. But gradually, I was able to say more and understand more Japanese. Over time, I became more familiar with my new world—a world that I was in, but not of.

Jesus was born as a helpless infant. He left his mighty throne to be born as a tiny baby in a foreign world. He couldn’t feed himself or change his diapers. He couldn’t speak Hebrew or Aramaic immediately. He didn’t know Jewish customs until he could experience them. But as he grew in stature, and as he studied, he learned language and

culture, scripture and worldview. This learning was necessary for him to be able to teach others who his Father was. He started teaching at age 12!

The reality that Jesus would lay aside his glory for this assignment is amazing to me. I had precious little to give up to be a missionary. Christ left everything. Think about all that he gave up to wrap his spirit in flesh—and a baby at that! And in exchange for what? It often makes me shake my head in wonderment to consider these lofty things.

Despite the tremendous differences, becoming a missionary helps me to better understand a little of what Jesus experienced through his incarnation.

Christ’s incarnation challenges me to model my life after his missionary life. Wow, any sacrifice I may make is but a small offering considering . . .

Christ’s incarnation humbles me to realize the Father’s love for me to send his One and Only Son to a new world to save that world.

Christ’s incarnation compels me to show my Father to my Japanese friends.

Being a dad myself helps me better understand our Father’s love. But as a missionary, sharing with my Messiah and Master in a tiny, but powerful way, an incarnation of sorts shakes me to my core.

Jeffrey S. Johnston

Vice President for Communications

Tokyo, Japan

I grew up in a small town in Arkansas, and one of my fondest childhood memories was going out with Daddy to cut a Christmas tree every year. The years kind of run together, but just doing this annual trek stands out as a highlight of each Christmas season. We always cut the tree in the same wooded area outside town owned by some friends, and half the fun was just tromping around together in those deep, still woods.

I remember one year in particular when Daddy and I hunted and hunted and hunted for just the right tree—a tall, round, fragrant cedar tree. We had already been crisscrossing those woods for a couple of hours in the bitter cold, night was now falling, and a light snow was beginning to stick to the frozen earth. Then we spotted a 20-foot tall tree that was bare of branches for the first 10 feet of the trunk. But the top 10 feet of that tree really looked perfect. We had finally found the tree.

Daddy cut down that tree and then trimmed it back to where we'd have the top 10 feet to take home with us. It was a beauty! We dragged it back to the car and stuffed about six feet of it into the trunk of our 1960 Oldsmobile, and the rest was protruding out the back. When we got back home, Mother and my two sisters joined Daddy and me in setting up the tree and decorating it. It was quite beautiful to start with, and that tree became downright magical by the time the lights were strung, ornaments hung, and shiny 'icicles' draped over the branches. Even now I can close my eyes and see the twinkling lights in that darkened room, and almost smell the delightful cedar fragrance.

With about 10 days to go until Christmas, that tree was a constant object of my rapt attention. And the presents were gradually appearing, with a big surge magically taking place on Christmas Eve. What

sweet, sweet memories. You know, the only thing missing for me on those wonderful childhood Christmases was, well, actually the most important thing. I knew the Christmas story well enough, but I didn't yet know—really know—the main character of that story.

While Mother was a Jesus follower and taught my sisters and me and took us to church, somehow I just didn't get it. Daddy was an agnostic—he tolerated Mother's faith but never really encouraged her in it. So I grew up confused about Jesus and the Bible, and certainly didn't get spiritual input from Daddy. And the Christmas story—the real story—was never really a part of our family Christmas celebrations.

Fast-forward forty years. I now know Jesus and I'm following him. I'm also married to a sweet Jesus follower, Hilary, and father of four wonderful kids. By God's grace, Hilary and I are giving our kids a chance to know—really know—the main character in that wonderful, sweet Christmas story.

Even though we can't get a real cedar tree here in Singapore, by keeping Jesus central in our family—at Christmas and beyond—we're giving our kids a foundation that will last into eternity. Won't you join us at Jesus' feet, singing, "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing. Oh come let us adore him, Christ the King"?

Stu Lynch

Training Coordinator/Southeast Asia
Singapore

December 22 The Gifts of the Christ Child

Unto us a Child is born; unto us a Savior is given!

—Luke 2:11

Jesus. Such a wonderful name, and such a gentle, but powerful Savior.

Jesus came “to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear” (Luke 1:74). Free from the fears that paralyze us, terrorize us, and control us.

The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever (Psalm 19:9). But the fears Jesus came to free us from are impure, leading us to sin and to mar the divine image in which he made us. Jesus keeps us, sanctifying us in purity and free from fear that corrupts.

Some of us had alcoholic parents who made the world an uncertain place. Others grew up in some other kind of abuse that may still haunt us. Or maybe there’s a deep-seated fear that we will never measure up. For all of these fears and more—God’s grace abounds to the humble, but he opposes the proud (1 Peter 5:5). Let us receive much from our compassionate and powerful King.

Oh, let us bow down before him with grateful hearts, humbly submitting to his refining fire that purifies for eternity. How can I neglect to give him any less than my all, having received Christ’s magnificent gift of true freedom?

Michael L. Wilson

Church Multiplication Catalyst

Japan, Asia, America

December 23 Welcoming Surprises

It was about 10:30 pm on Christmas Eve, and we were trying to leave our church, the International Community Chapel of Saitama, following the Candlelight service. Kimie had heard about the service from other Japanese friends who were students of an English Bible Class taught by one of our coworkers. She had come for the service, enthusiastically gone caroling with us (a very non-Japanese tradition embraced by our church), and returned afterwards for the hot cocoa and cookies. I guessed her to be a bit over 40 years old—and obviously not in any rush to leave. Her English was excellent and as she helped with the clean-up in the kitchen she told us that she had worked at an International High School in Tokyo, and now was a private English teacher. I was surprised she wasn't in a rush to go home . . .

“This is just what I've been looking for!” I must admit that we don't hear this very often from someone who has come to church for the first time, so I was a little taken back. But it was late Christmas Eve, we had spent the entire evening at the church and now wanted to go home to begin our family Christmas celebration.

Kimie came to church off and on over the next few months. She joined her Japanese friends at the English Bible Class. Like a dry sponge being immersed in liquid, she drank in all that she heard. That spring, a coworker needed me to substitute teach her English Bible Class, and Kimie and I began to develop a friendship.

In May, I was asked to speak at a Christian Women's Luncheon and invited the women of the English Bible Class to attend. Kimie was among those who trekked the one and one-half hours from Tokorozawa, where we live, to the American Club in Tokyo, where the luncheon was held. I remember little about my theme, except that we were preparing for our last home assignment and I sensed God wanted me to speak boldly about making a decision for Christ. I gave a

challenge—“If you are thinking about becoming a follower of Christ, don't put it off. You don't know what the future will hold. Now is the time.”

Two weeks later Kimie and I met at a nearby restaurant for lunch. She told me she had been baptized as a Mormon as a young adult, but soon after began to have serious doubts about what they taught. She left the Mormon Church and had not been in touch with them since. As the conversation progressed, I asked Kimie if she believed in Christ. Her eyes were bright as she said, “Yes! What do I need to do now?”

I gathered through the conversation she was wondering if she needed to be baptized again—and I said yes. We were within a week of leaving on home assignment . . . not enough time to prepare for baptism in our church! However, Stan returned to Japan in October of that year for a couple of weeks, and Kimie was baptized at that time, along with three others.

I think back on that late Christmas Eve with thankfulness that God allowed me to visibly see His love awakening Kimie to receive Christ as her Lord and Savior.

Faith De La Cour

Bible Teacher and Missionary Care Facilitator
Tokorozawa, Japan

December 24 Santa Clauses in Japan

During my childhood, I knew well that Christmas was the day when good children could receive special presents.

I was born in Japan. There are very few Christians, under one percent of the population, but almost every Japanese knows and loves the Christmas season. Especially me as a child!

On Christmas Eve, (not on December 25), many Japanese kids decorate a Christmas tree with ornaments, eat chicken legs (not turkey!), celebrate by eating a Christmas cake, and drink special juice. And every child knows of Santa Claus who wears a red costume, has white whiskers, is red-faced, and most importantly gives a great present to good children on Christmas Eve.

When I was fifteen years old, I knew that Christmas was the day when Jesus was born.

I went to the church with my friend, and knew Jesus was my Savior. It was there that I met missionaries for the first time. They gave me delicious cakes and special food. I thought they filled the party with the atmosphere of Santa Claus!

Since then, I have loved missionaries—they gave me the true present of Christmas, Jesus.

Today, there are many missionaries who for different reasons have not been able to stay in Japan and share the Good News. But I am so thankful that there still are wonderful, faithful missionaries who remain here; Santa Clauses who continue sharing with Japanese people about Jesus.

I appreciate missionaries and all of you who send missionaries to Japan. You are sponsors of the real Santa Clauses!

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring Good News, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isaiah 52:7).

Tsuneya Kiguchi

Business Manager/Japan office

Tokyo, Japan

December 25 Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

. . . *You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

—Psalm 139:13, 14

“She must be very frustrated with her children,” I thought. I had noticed a young non-Christian mother near the door at a parenting seminar I was leading at a local preschool in this western Tokyo suburb. Her distressed face said more than a thousand words, so I was disappointed when she got up to leave before the end of the seminar. She would not hear the points I was going to share later about disciplining children in love and communicating positively with them.

By the time I had finished my presentation and answered the final questions of the day, I was exhausted and ready to go home. Then Junko*, the event organizer, came up to me and said, “You know that mother who left early? Her name is Sayuri. On the way out the door she told me she just learned she’s pregnant with twins. The idea of caring for two more children in addition to the two preschool-aged daughters she already has is too overwhelming. She and her husband are close to deciding to have an abortion. Will you pray with me that God will change her mind?”

As we prayed, I was reminded of the key point I had shared before Sayuri left—Every child is a unique, special creation of God, fearfully and wonderfully made. Had she really listened? Did she even understand the truth of what I had said? What were the chances I would ever see her again?

One Sunday a couple of months later, Junko greeted me before our church worship service.

“Remember Sayuri, that mother who was planning to have an abortion? She’s coming today!” When I saw Sayuri, I recognized her immediately—and she was visibly pregnant! God had answered our prayers, and Sayuri and her husband had chosen life for their twins. As I drew near, I placed my hand on her growing tummy and said, “We prayed for these babies.” With tears in her eyes, she said, “Thank you. Thank you so much!”

Today, Sayuri is a follower of Christ, and she is raising not two, but four fearfully and wonderfully made daughters to learn about Jesus and someday follow him.

But God’s miracle of life in creating us to serve Him pales in comparison to His entry into our world in the Person of Jesus—the fearfully and wonderfully made God-Man—knit together in the virgin Mary’s womb “as the Holy Spirit came upon her, and the power of the Most High overshadowed her” (see Luke 1:35). What an amazing God we serve!

Barbara Bauman

Discovering the Joy of Parenting classes
Tokorozawa, Japan

**All names have been changed.*

Wrap-Up The Gift of Giving

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

—James 1:7

I'll never forget the day I accepted Jesus into my life. I was nine years old and was raised in a Christian home, my father being a lay pastor at the time. I was given new life by the greatest gift ever from the most generous giver of all time. There was freedom from all the trials and temptations that had haunted me, and there was eternal hope—something the world was unable to provide.

As I think back on that day, I find myself so blessed by the heritage that Jesus planted in my life. That same freedom and hope that came through the little child in Bethlehem is a free gift to all—but not all have the chance to hear about him.

Little did I know that this was a gift that would keep on giving. A gift of hope, freedom and joy unexplained. Jesus wanted to give a gift of eternity for all of humankind.

Thus, he sent me on a mission . . . a mission I was initially reluctant to follow. A mission to “seek and save the lost” in the neediest region of the world with this message.

Today, Jesus' name is being shared in places like Japan where the opportunity to hear about Christ is so, so limited. I know Christ is building His church across Asia because He cares! Jesus gave you and me a gift and a message that keeps on giving.

As you reflect on this great gift that Jesus has given us this Advent season, I want to thank you for your generosity—for you are a giver of life, of hope, of freedom, and of joy to a world that is desperate for what only Jesus can offer. Thank you for your friendship, your

encouragement, your prayers, the ways you have been involved in giving life to our missionaries and our God-given mission.

May the joy of the Christ-child fill your heart and soul through this Christmas season.

We love and appreciate you!

Joe Handley

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