



Lift

DECEMBER ISSUE

INSPIRING OUR READERS TO GIVE THEMSELVES FULLY TO GOD



I WILL *LIFT* UP THE CUP OF SALVATION AND CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD. PSALM 116



Home for the Holidays

BY DON McLAUGHLIN

Susan and I have spent twenty-three Christmas holidays with her family. They really know how to do the whole “Home for the Holidays” scene! I think Susan’s dad wishes he had been Santa Claus for every child in the world, and her mom would make a perfect Mrs. Claus. Each Christmas celebration in their home has been remarkable, but two really stand out, and they are related.

My first year with them was holiday overload. I was so blown away by their celebration of family. I had never spent one Christmas with any of my grandparents, cousins, or extended family, but the McIndoos could not imagine Christmas without them. At the center of it all was Grandpa Chet. When Susan walked through the door he was the first to give her a hug. He greeted her with a little song he had been singing to her all her life. He had changed the words just for her, and she loved it, I could tell. His quit wit, grandfatherly chuckle, and ever-present smile were so engaging. There was such a special quality to their holiday family traditions.

I had never had a Christmas like it, and I never wanted another one without it, which is where the second remarkable Christmas comes in. It was a cold Indiana day in December of 1994, just weeks before my twelfth Christmas with them, that we stood hand to hand, and tear to tear in the Sunset Memory Garden, saying our goodbyes to Grandpa Chet.

Alzheimer’s had another victim, and this time its deadly effects came with lightening speed. Diagnosed in August, he was gone in November. We all stood around Grandma Margie, Chet’s faithful wife and best friend for over sixty years. Her hands felt colder than usual and the mist in her normally crystal-clear eyes belied a much deeper fog of grief that had enveloped her heart.

As we traveled home from the funeral I began to wonder, “What will Christmas be like without Chet? Who will greet Susan with her favorite song? Who will make us all laugh? Who will beat us in Pinochle, Hearts, Rook, and Canasta? Who will make the grandchildren and great-grandchildren

feel like they are all his absolute favorite?" My mind drifted toward Margie and that misty look in her eyes. Would she even come? Could she possibly celebrate? Would it all remind her too much of Chet...not the good times, but of her tremendous loss?

Christmas came. Susan's dad Walt was the new greeter. There wasn't a song. And even though we missed it greatly, it was somehow appropriate. The fresh grief was still in the air. We hugged a little more tightly. We were freer with our assurances of love. We got the kids settled, unpacked our luggage, and came back to the family room, the same one where I had first felt that amazing "Home for the Holidays" feeling. Chet was absent...inescapably absent.

We waited for the rest of Susan's family to arrive. One sibling, then another, and soon the house was bustling with all their children and ours. The kitchen was yielding its alluring fragrance, and conversation began to grow. Each time someone arrived, everyone, even the grandchildren, looked to the door. It hadn't been said, but I could tell we were all waiting for Margie. Somehow we needed her for Christmas to be "right" and instinctively we knew she somehow needed us. When she finally came through the door it was as if Christmas had arrived. Everyone surrounded her. There were great-grandchildren hugging her legs as Walt hugged his mom, and then took her coat and dusted off the light covering of snow that had fallen on her shoulders. Her grandchildren then surrounded her, loving her with such tenderness. She held them tightly. In their embrace, she felt their love for her and Chet. And as they embraced their grandma they felt once again the

presence of their beloved grandfather.

I was so touched by this display of love and courage. There simply is no retreat for this family. If Christmas meant both joy and grief, so be it. They were still going to go through it together. If Christmas meant both laughter and tears, they would share them with each other. In our first Christmas without Chet we all grew to an even greater appreciation of what it had meant to have a lifetime of holidays with him. The celebration of family I witnessed at my first Christmas with them took on greater meaning. Family was not a fairytale existence where all is laughter and no one sheds a tear. Rather, family was a place where we do life together. Life as it comes. Life when it is raw. Life when it hurts. I saw them embrace life as it really is, accept the new reality, and take the first step of many steps to live meaningfully and to love abundantly.

We have had many Christmases since '94. We still miss Chet, and now Margie is moving into a nursing home. It may be soon that she will see Chet again for Christmas, and we will again hug tightly those who remain.

Someone will become the next greeter, and someone else will sing a new song. It will be someone else who hangs up the coats, and it will be someone else's turn to win at Canasta. But the love of this family will continue...

the love they have learned from the previous generation will be faithfully passed to the next. I guess home will always feel like "home" when the gift of love is the most important present. ☺



CLOSER

Randy Gill CCLI 184877a

I am weak but You are strong
Jesus keep me from all wrong;
I'll be satisfied as long as I walk,
O Lord, close to you (chorus)



SONG



Through this world of toils and snares,
If I falter, Lord, who cares?
Who with me my burden shares,
None but You,
O Lord, close to You (chorus)

When my feeble life is o'er,
Time for me will be no more,
Guide me to that peaceful shore,
Let it be, O Lord, close to You
(chorus)

CHORUS

Closer, closer, closer to You
Closer, closer, closer to you

LUKE 2

VERSES
8-20

The Message of the Angels to the Bethlehem shepherds

AND THERE WERE SHEPHERDS
living out in the fields nearby, keeping
watch over their flocks at night.

AN ANGEL OF THE LORD
appeared to them, and the glory of
the Lord shone around them, and
they were terrified. But the angel
said to them, "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.
This will be a sign to you: You will
find a baby wrapped in cloths and
lying in a manger."

SUDDENLY A GREAT COMPANY OF
the heavenly host appeared with the
angel, praising God and saying, "Glory
to God in the highest, and
on earth peace to men on
whom his favor rests."
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." So
they hurried off and found Mary and
Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in
the manger. 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. But
Mary treasured up all these things and
pondered them in her heart. The
shepherds returned, glorifying and
praising God for all the things they
had heard and seen, which were just as
they had been told.

REFLECTION

JOURNAL

on your “UP” RELATIONSHIP

After reading the passage in Luke on the facing page, record your personal responses below.

1. Who are your favorite characters in the biblical Christmas story? _____

2. Who do you find to be the most mysterious? _____

3. What do you think went through Mary's mind each time a new person or group came to see the baby Jesus? _____

4. Of all the visitors to the baby Jesus, who do you imagine Mary related with the best? _____

5. As a young girl married to a day-laborer carpenter, how might she have related to poor shepherds? _____

6. If you could be one of the visitors to the baby Jesus, who would you want to be? _____

7. If you were one of the Wise Men, and you could give Jesus any gift, what would you bring him? _____

8. How could you present that gift to Jesus, or to someone in Jesus' name today? _____

Abner ben David was old at forty — and cold. The wind blowing over the hillside was chilly. Deep lines had been etched into this shepherd's face. He felt nervous, uneasy and uncomfortable. He had spent his entire life out on Bethlehem's hills but today, instead of hundreds of sheep, the small town was packed with people...thousands of people listening attentively to the Teacher. They could hear him fairly well, except when the wind whisked away his words.

Abner's flocks were in good hands this week, cared for by his sons, but Abner had come to listen to Jesus of Nazareth. Today the Teacher was

night, years ago, Abner had hired men to help him watch his flock, but the hired men all ran away when they heard the sounds of a mountain lion roaming the hills. Abner had stayed. Shepherding was his livelihood and the sheep were his own. He knew the sacrifices that good shepherding required. He knew about defending helpless lambs. He knew about laying down his life for his sheep. That's what good shepherds did.

Jesus continued, "Suppose you have 100 sheep and when night comes one is missing. What do you do? You leave the 99 sheep all safe together and climb the hills, searching until you find the lost sheep. Then you pick him up, put him on your shoulders, bring him down the hill to the camp, and your fellow shepherds rejoice with you."



the Good Shepherd

by Sandra Mackey

A FICTIONALIZED ACCOUNT BASED ON JOHN 10:1-18

talking about salvation, how God came to save his people from their sins, to rescue them and gather them close.

When Jesus' illustration turned to sheep, Abner felt better. He knew a lot more about sheep than people. "The good shepherd," Jesus was saying, "lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand who doesn't own the flock runs away when he sees the wolf coming, but not the good shepherd...." One

"Your heavenly Father is like that," Jesus said. "When you have lost your way, he will rescue you and save you and never give up on you until he finds you...and you find him."

Abner's heart was racing. He felt a lump in his throat. He understood. Abner had combed the hills for lost sheep. He knew the joy of discovery, of rescuing the sheep from a thicket, of

(continued on back cover)

FAVORITE FAMILY HOLIDAY TRADITIONS

OUR FAVORITE FAMILY HOLIDAY tradition is when we bake cookies. My mom has these archaic cookie cutter designs. We make the dough and bake the cookies but the fun part is decorating them. We always have some traditional Christmas colors for our icing, but then we'll throw a color in the mix like brown or grayish purple. My brother who is not so artistically inclined, and my mother who laughs throughout the entire process, can't keep their hands from shaking long enough to paint a straight line with the icing. She and my brother usually end up winning the categories of "most likely to make you sick", and "most likely to be eaten by the family pet." It's such an important family tradition that one year my mom got us all our own aprons with our names on the front. It makes for a great family picture when they're covered in icing and flour. We never get around to actually eating the cookies, but the bond in making them always makes our Christmas a special one.

Mark Miller

I COME FROM A LARGE FAMILY.

There are 38 in my immediate family and all sing fairly well, so we sing for hours! But the neatest thing we do is to sit in a large circle, all facing each other. Then the first person tells something

he really admires about the person on his right, then that person tells what he likes about the person on his right, etc. Many tears flow from those precious times together, not to mention the confidence it gives to the person who has been elevated by the comments. We all hate to see the night end.

Ryan Touchton

"HOLIDAY TRADITION" IS A PHRASE that brings pure joy to my soul. Every Christmas the whole Bagwell family – 23 aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and other assorted family members – come to Springfield, TN to spend Christmas eve together in *one house!* The experience is that of constant chaos. The evening schedule includes a huge Christmas dinner, a gingerbread man contest that some plan for all year, and the annual bean bag toss. Now this is no ordinal horseshoe contest but an intense game of two people tossing a bean bag into old decorative popcorn tins. Then the entire family packs up in vans to the local congregation for an evening worship service. I can remember going to that worship service even as a kid. Through all the crazy Bagwell traditions and the chaos of the holiday season, it is the birth of our Savior that makes Christmas so special to me.

Justin Bagwell

(continued from page 6)

bringing it back and celebrating with his friends. He was that kind of shepherd. But he also knew how it felt to be that lost sheep — to wander off, feeling lost, aimless, trapped. There had been times in his life when he didn't know where he was or where he was going. Flailing about, struggling to climb out of what seemed like a deep ravine. That's why he came today to hear the Teacher, hoping to find the faith he had known as a child.

Abner kept remembering that night when he was about ten years old. He was out on the Bethlehem hills with his father, watching as the sheep lay down for the night. The stars were brilliant, dancing in the black sky. Suddenly a brighter light flooded the hillside. A loud voice pealed like thunder, "Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people. For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!" Thousands of angels appeared in the sky singing "Glory to God in the Highest. Peace on Earth, good will to men."

Abner had gone with his father that night to see the baby boy. He had kneeled down beside the manger and touched the baby's little hand. He still remembered how it felt to have those perfect little fingers curl around his thumb. In the intervening years, he had often wondered about that little newborn baby. What had become of him? By now he must be thirty-something.

Just then, Abner felt big tears begin to roll down his cheeks and onto his beard. God's love began to fill his heart until it seemed it would explode. "I wonder if Jesus is the little baby I saw that night, the Savior of the world?" Abner wondered. "Yes! He surely must be the One."

Just then the wind caught Jesus' words and blew them in Abner's direction. "I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." ☺



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OUR READERS TO GIVE THEMSELVES FULLY TO GOD.

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