

May the Peace and Joy of this Holy Season be with you and your loved ones, dear Friends and Partners, even as you reflect and rejoice in the remembered birth of Jesus, God's indescribable Gift!

Christmas comes but once a year – on our calendars. Many people around the world celebrate the holiday by looking back to the manger scene, while countless others, with a significantly less religious frame of reference, look forward to the red and white fur-trimmed jolly man in a sleigh drawn by reindeer, delivering much-anticipated gifts.

Who are you expecting or celebrating this Christmas? Is it a Santa who comes once a year to see if you are naughty or nice – and rewards you accordingly?

Or, do you celebrate Jesus who is Emmanuel, always with us, always for us, always in us – and **nothing** can separate us from His love?

When I was growing up, there was no such thing as *“Santa Claus is coming so you'd better be good!”* Expectation of gifts from that legendary character was a myth that I never had to “unbelieve”!

In fact, unlike most kids, the entire Christmas vacation was **not** my “favorite time of the year”. The yearly two-weeks-long winter break from school meant more hours working at Dad's gas station. And pumping gas out in the freezing sleet or snow, when the weather often got many degrees below zero, was downright miserable! As soon as I could, I would race back inside the station and sit on top of the wood-burning stove until I thawed out, which was often just about the time another car would pull up to the pumps!

Dad would never turn a customer away so, even on Christmas Day, I would invariably be out serving the travelers trying to get home for their holiday celebration.

Although we sometimes had a special family turkey dinner, we kids learned not to expect anything special under the Christmas tree. If a neighbor or distant family member happened to bring or send gifts, we were generally under no idle threat of them being taken away, should we leave some chore undone or did otherwise to raise Dad's ire!

One Christmas Eve, my three older sisters and I were all ordered to bring each of our wrapped gifts from under the tree to the backyard, where Daddy made us watch as proceeded to smash them into pieces with his ax! Although I was not the culprit that time, what did it matter? If one was guilty, we all shared the same punishment. That happened the Christmas before my ninth birthday and marked the time in my life when I began to despise Christmas – until I learned about the “Reason for the season” !

After being adopted into God's family, and being the recipient of the Greatest Gift ever given, Christmas took on a completely, wonderfully beautiful new meaning! I never have to think that my heavenly Father would take His Gift away from me - EVER!

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38)

Two thousand years ago, at just the right time, the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of the living God, was born to a humble virgin.

“But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman...” (Galatians 4:4)

While shepherds watched their flocks at night, the glory of the angel of the Lord suddenly shone upon them – and they were **terrified!**

Then the angel said to them, *“Don't be afraid. I have good news that will bring **great joy for everyone!**”* And he went on to tell them that the Son of God had taken up residence on the earth He created, bringing His peace and goodwill to all who would believe.

Life two thousand years ago was certainly not any easier than it is today. The people of the Promises of God were living under the power of the Roman Empire; they had no freedom to rail against a government that forced Joseph to travel with Mary who was about to give birth. They had no comfortable automobile, train or plane to take them to their destination. Most likely, they walked the ninety grueling miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, but perhaps they had a donkey on which Mary could ride. Neither option sounds at all comfortable to me, even were I not nine months pregnant!

Imagine being Mary for a moment and gazing in wide-eyed wonder at the tiny face of your Creator that lies sleeping in your arms!

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

He who breathed out star-studded galaxies, wrapped in rags and placed on a bed of straw in an animal's feeding trough because there was no room in the inn!

Fully God, but fully human, who wet His diaper, teethered, sucked His thumb, spit up, did all the ordinary things that babies do, including learning to walk upright on the ground He fashioned through His Word. God, a human, who understands us because He became one of us.

Did He experience weakness? Absolutely. He had to entrust Himself to two humans to feed and clothe and nurture Him. To trust God's warning to flee to Egypt when Herod's evil edict came out to murder *“all the males from two years old and under.”* (See Matthew 2:13-18)

Did He experience rejection? Absolutely. He was despised by the very ones He came to save. Jesus warned His disciples, *“If they mistreat Me, they will mistreat you. So, do not be surprised that the world will not accept your testimony of Jesus, or that they will reject a leader who believes in Jesus and tries to do the best he can for America.”*

Does He care if you are afraid? Absolutely. He calmed the storms raging around the fishing boats with a simple commanding word. He calls us to come under the shelter of His peace when storms rage around us, whether they be illnesses, family estrangements, viruses, national election results, or etc. that rock our boats.

Does He understand sadness and grief? Absolutely. He cried just as we cry when someone dies. He knew there would be a revelation of God's glory when He called Lazarus forth from his four-days-old tomb, yet He was *“moved in spirit and troubled”*, as He approached the cave of His dead friend.

“Jesus wept.” (John 11:35)

The shortest verse in the entire Bible is profoundly revealing of a heart in tune with His creation, suffering the sting of death.

So, WHO are you expecting or celebrating this Christmas?

For the wise man or woman, Christmas is every day. Jesus is the Gift that keeps on giving, as we live in joyful anticipation of the final call heavenward, to be united with our wonderful Savior, Mighty God, Everlasting Father in glory.

Christmas is about Christ - in us, near us, for us.

Moreover, He is coming back again, to receive for Himself a people He has called His own. He will bring a new heaven and a new earth; He will wipe away all tears of sorrow, pain and sickness. He will exchange our aging, lowly bodies for new glorious bodies like His own. (See Philippians 3:21) Moreover, He will remove forever the fear of death, that last barrier which now separates us from our loved ones. We will finally be **home!**

And, as Hansi always says, **The best is yet to come!**

May God's indescribable GIFT be the One you celebrate and long for this holy-days season and always.

Love in Christ,

Jessie