

The Best of All Gifts

THE ABSENCE OF FAMILY, FRIENDS AND HOLIDAY TRAPPINGS DAMPENED MY CHRISTMAS SPIRIT. BUT MY BABY DAUGHTER HELPED ME TO FOCUS ON WHAT WAS TRULY IMPORTANT.

It was a Saturday night, just two weeks before Christmas 1998, and instead of marching through the malls in search of gifts and glitter, I found myself driving along a dark country road with my precious 19-month-old daughter, Olivia. This was more than a road trip. My husband and I were moving from western Wisconsin to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where Don's new job was taking us away from our home of over 10 years.

There were no Christmas parties this year, only packing sessions. And I was less than thrilled with the idea of moving to what I considered a too-remote area in a too-cold climate. In fact, I was having a hard time hearing God's voice on the matter. "If I could just get a sense of purpose for this place, maybe I wouldn't feel so gray about it," I prayed.

Don had already been working out of town for months, and I was growing weary of caring for our new baby alone. The chaos of packing our things, selling our home and saying goodbye had become a monumental task in my mind. By moving day, I was good for little more than walking circles around our faithful friends who came over to help finish the packing and load the truck.

My main concern during all this turmoil, however, was Olivia, who was about to experience her second major move in less than a year. Just nine months before, Don and I had traveled to China to adopt this long-awaited child, and although she was only 10 months old when we brought her home, the change to an unfamiliar language and foreign surroundings was a major adjustment for her.

Now, after all her adjusting, it didn't seem right that we

were taking her away from the people she had come to know, the very people who had prayed her into our family. Though I knew God must have a purpose in repositioning us, I couldn't see what it was.

HIS WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS Our Christmas-time move led me to me wonder what Mary must have been thinking on the night Jesus was born. Surely she had dreamed about the special day when she would give birth to Israel's promised Messiah.

However, I doubt her fantasy included a jolting mule-ride from Nazareth to Bethlehem on her due date. She probably didn't expect to be giving birth in a haystack, either, and she must have been somewhat befuddled to find herself peering down into a slobbery feeding trough to see the beautiful face of her newborn son.

But God had a purpose for His plan, absurd as it seemed at the time, and Mary had a knack for quietly treasuring the things of God in her heart. If only I could learn to do the same!

Because we had moved so soon before Christmas, I had forfeited the usual holiday preparations. But by Christmas Eve I managed to decorate a tree and set up our treasured nativity set. It was a scant version of my Christmas fantasy, but I felt I was at least covering the basics.

Work had taken Don out of town for four days prior to Christmas Eve, and I was eager for him to return home so we could celebrate the holy night as a family. I knew flight schedules would be affected by the holidays, but I hoped he wouldn't be too late. In the silence of the night, my daughter and I waited.

Time for the candlelight church service came and went. Okay, I thought, we'll just have a quiet evening together after he gets home. So we waited some more. But when the baby's bedtime arrived, I gave up and tucked her in with a kiss and a prayer. Disappointment set in.

For years, Don and I had dreamed of celebrating our first Christmas as a family of three. After 11 years of childlessness, we had started the adoption process in 1996 with the hope of having a baby by that Christmas. However, two more years had passed before the pitter-patter of baby feet brightened our holiday.

I had plenty of time to collect visions of teddy bears and popcorn garlands. I had ample opportunity to dream of sitting beside family and friends on a candlelit Christmas Eve, snuggling our very own bundle of joy in the glow of a towering Christmas tree. What I hadn't planned on was an invasion of Styrofoam popcorn and towering cardboard boxes!

Hours later when Don finally appeared at the door, apologizing for the schedule that had detained him, I was relieved to have him home but too tired to stay up much longer. "Christmas Eve was a loss," I pouted as I headed for bed.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS Before I slid under the covers, I went into Olivia's room to check on her. When I peered into her crib, I saw a little round-faced angel, sound asleep. I stopped to listen to the quiet whispers of her soft breath.

Despite my disappointment about the night—and the move itself—I knew I had much to be thankful for. God had seen our longing for a child, and He had led us along a painfully marvelous path to join us with this tender little lamb, born in obscurity, worlds away—the greatest gift we could ever ask for.

In some ways, Olivia's first Christmas was nothing to write home about. While our families were together feasting on crown roast and turkey, we were alone in an unpacked house, nibbling on cocktail wieners. While our home church assembled to worship in the glow of familiar fellowship, we were scanning the newspaper for a place to worship among strangers.

But we count our blessings when we realize that Olivia's

family in China may never even hear of the Savior. Or if there are believers in their midst, they may be among those who lift silent praises in China's persecuted, underground church.

After church on Christmas morning, Olivia opened modest gifts beneath the tree, examining each one carefully. Books, baby dolls and ribbons were strewn across the floor, adding to the chaos of our already messy house. That's just the way it should be on Olivia's first Christmas, I thought, scanning the room with a smile.

What touched me most, however, was that in the midst of the clutter, the presents and the new life that lay ahead of us, Olivia's innocent heart was continually drawn back to one simple thing. Over and over she would ask to be lifted up to see the nativity scene on the mantle, and each time she would gently reach her tiny hand inside and snatch up the baby Jesus figurine. We often pointed out the other figurines—the three kings, the animals, the angel—but she would look past them all and take Jesus as her own.

As I reflected on her singlemindedness I realized, suddenly, that all the holiday trappings I had missed were of little consequence. Their purpose, after all, was merely to point to this one thing: the baby in the manger.

Just as Mary didn't see, on the night Jesus was born, the purpose for His humble birth, I didn't see the purpose for our move far away from all that was familiar. But what I did see was that if, like His mother, Mary, and my baby daughter, Olivia, I would keep my eyes on Him, He would reveal His plan in His time. And I would look back and know that His ways had been right all along.

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