

It Didn't Look Like Christmas

It was 1957,
Christmastime. Elvis was my favorite singer. And Christmas was my favorite holiday—except for this year. Daddy's job with the Santa Fe railroad had moved our family—Daddy, Mother, my two younger sisters and me—from our small, friendly town in Kansas to a strange, dusty town in the southwestern desert.

Instead of celebrating a white Christmas with the typical warm and fuzzy sights, sounds and smells I had known each year at Grandma and Grandpa's big festively decorated house, I was thrown into a strange brown land with neighborhoods of small row houses near the train tracks and neighbors who spoke little English.

There were other things I missed—Christmas Eve and hearing Grandpa recite the passage of Luke 2:7: “And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for Him in the inn” (NKJV).

Adding salt to the wound of “Christmas not looking at all like Christmas” was the missing tree. Daddy had called to say that he would be arriving home late and wasn't sure he would be able to get a tree.

In the late afternoon of Christmas Eve, Mother was at the kitchen sink, half-heartedly chopping dates for her annual

Christmas pudding, when there was a loud knock at the door. It was our neighbor who introduced herself as Señora Sanchez. She asked if we had any *masa*?

"Or—how you say—corn mixture?"

"No, we have no *mesa*," Mother answered. "I mean, no *masa*—but we *do* have an *automobilo*!"

Cocking her head with a puzzled look, Señora Sanchez asked, "Is it you mean *car*?"

Within minutes Mother and I were driving Señora Sanchez in our car/*automobilo* to help her find more ingredients for the *masa* that was part of her family's traditional Christmas Eve meal—tamales.

That year I was introduced to a new vision of Christmas. Absent were the snow and familiar aromas of baked pies and cookies and the presence of Grandpa and Grandma, aunts, uncles and cousins. In their place were Señora and Señor Sanchez and eight kids—my age and younger—who, along with their love and kindness, shared their delicious dinner of corn tamales and, for dessert, heavenly sweet caramelized tamales.

Daddy came home without a tree, but it didn't seem to matter. That night, as the moon rose above the Arizona desert, two railroad families, sitting only a few feet away from the tracks, shared a Christmas unlike any they had ever

experienced. It was a celebration of Mexican tamales blended with English date pudding and the off-key sounds of broken English and Spanish as two families joyfully sang Christmas carols under the stars.

A curious thing happened to me on that Christmas. I realized that the celebration of the birth of the Babe in the manger was not limited to location, familiar environments or cultures. The Babe was God's "indescribable gift" (see 2 Cor. 9:15) for the redemption of all mankind—a gift of unconditional love for any of us to receive as Savior (see John 3:16).

From our house to yours, be comforted this Christmas. Regardless of where you are, what your background or what you eat (or don't eat), the Spirit of the Lord is with you, inviting you to celebrate His birth.

Merry Christmas and Feliz Navidad!