

Christmas Thoughts

By Meg Hunter-Kilmer (Reflection posted on Facebook & Instagram)



Your Christmas is not going to be perfect.

Some of you know this with shattering certainty. You're dreading the empty seat at the table, the inevitable meltdown, the barely-disguised disdain, the pews full of a thousand people, not one of whom knows your name.

If your life isn't what you wanted--what you want--I see you. If you got the husband but no children, if your marriage collapsed, if chronic health issues have ruined your plans, if your kids are dealing with addiction, if you're mourning, if you're short on money every month, if you're overwhelmed, if you're haunted by trauma, if you're desperately alone, I see you.

He sees you.

Christmas is like that for a lot of us.

Then again, maybe you're just excited. Maybe there's no shadow looming over your Christmas this year. Maybe no one in your family is estranged or dead or lonely or depressed or exhausted.

Well, somebody's going to puke. Or say the wrong thing. Or turn into an over-stimulated, present-hungry monster. Your Christmas isn't going to be perfect either.

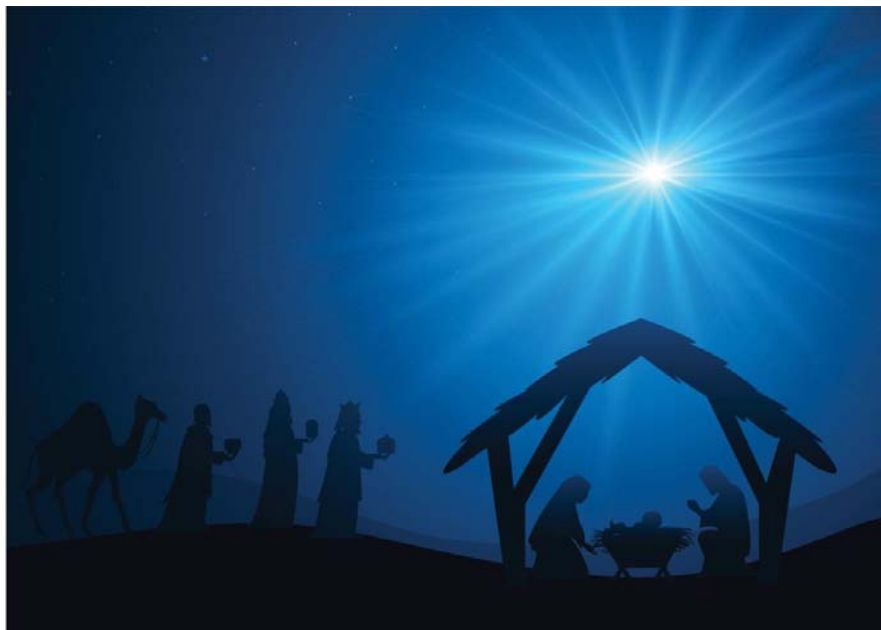
Hallmark movies make it seem like life needs to be (or become) perfect at Christmas, but Christmas isn't about a perfect home and family and career. It's about an atypical family, an uncomfortable situation, an impoverished group of workers, an unredeemed world, and the God who came into their mess to tell them how wildly loved they all are.

The one who makes all things new has come into our world, into your life, to love you through all this. When everything is wrong this Christmas, hang on to him.

Pick up that baby whose Momma had to lay him in a feed trough, whose toddlerhood would be spent running from a murderous king, whose childhood would be haunted by the sound of hammer on nails, always promising the Cross that he took up when he came down into our mess.

You don't need a Hallmark Christmas, with gentle snowfalls that never warrant more than a sweater and a scarf, with flannel-wearing heroes and ice skating mishaps that lead to a perfect first kiss, with loose ends all tied up.

You need a baby in a barn with a frantic dad and an exhausted mom. You need a Savior. And a disaster of a life is the perfect place for a Savior to come.



How Holy Can My Family Be?¹

*Jesus went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man. -
Luke 2*



It is probably fair to say that none of us feels that our family is just like the Holy Family. Jesus, Mary and Joseph can at first seem to be too unreachable an ideal for our own family. Perhaps, especially at this time of the year, we are most intensely aware of the limitations of our family - of the various families we are a part of. Selfishness, stubbornness, independence can appear to be so great that we can question the integrity of our family as a family, let alone see any real holiness there. How holy can my own family be? What help can a reflection upon the Holy Family have for me today?

The first thing to consider is to humbly acknowledge the humanity of our family - including my own humanity and that of everyone in the group. Human beings are capable of great things, but every human being is capable of great selfishness. This kind of acknowledgement isn't an acceptance of the behavior or dynamics of my family as good, or even that all of it should be tolerated. This first step is a step away from denial. We can't cope with what we don't even admit is there. The second step is to acknowledge that each person in the family is seeing things, and responding to them, from his or her own perspective. Nobody really wakes up in the morning

¹ Article found online at Creighton University's Online Ministries
(<https://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/Advent/Holy-Family.html>)

and says, "How can I be selfish and difficult for everyone today?" We all are choosing something that seems to us to be good - perhaps good for me and not for you - but my choice is for something I see as good. This acknowledgement isn't very inspiring, but it can be helpful if it leads us to a growing understanding of what each of us in our family are looking for.

Real understanding can lead to real compassion. Maybe someone in the family is like a barking dog or a self-absorbed princess or is into self-protective control by not investing in conversation or self-revelation or even simple help around the house. The more we see what is going on, the easier it will be to try to see it with compassion. What fear is at work here? Dogs bark when they are afraid. Self-absorption and passive-aggression are so often rooted in fearful self-protection. Once we can see the underlying needs or hurts that seem to be shaping our behaviors, we can more easily love those family members. Love is what will heal us. Love will make us stronger. Love will lead to greater gratitude. And grateful people can more easily notice the needs of others and love them.

Contemplating Jesus, Mary and Joseph at this time of the year can help us. Joseph had to be so afraid when he was told Mary would be with child. The one thing he knew for certain is that he was not the father. Just imagine the temptation to judge Mary! But, Joseph believed and trusted. He accepted the role of servant. He took Mary as his wife, accepting the shame and embarrassment that the people of their village must have placed on him. Mary couldn't have fully understood God's plan for her or for her son. But she believed and trusted. She accepted the role of servant. Their child, Jesus, became the Servant of God's mission in our world.

How can our family become more holy? Through compassionate love and growing trust in God, so that which leads to tension, ongoing stress and outright conflict can be healed.

St. Ignatius tells us that Love is a mutual exchange of gifts. The lover gives gifts to the loved one and the loved one becomes a lover in giving gifts to the beloved. Ignatius also says that Love is expressed in deeds rather than in words. So, in these days ahead, let us give gifts of understanding, compassion and healing love to each member of our family. Let's listen, pay attention, acknowledge gifts and affirm them. Some things very holy will be affirmed. Let us find gestures, acts of kindness, time and support to give each other. Let us model for our children how to think of each other's needs first.

Every step we make in this direction of greater healing and love will help our family grow in holiness. How holy can we become? The real answer is that we can become as holy as we free each other to become. In this environment of openness to God's grace, God can do more than we can ask or imagine. And, like the Holy Family, we can be living witnesses, that "nothing is impossible with God." (Luke 2).

O Sacred Lord of Ancient Israel

By Meg Hunter-Kilmer (Article found at Meg's Blog [Held By His Pierced Hands](http://piercedhands.com) - piercedhands.com)



Sébastien Bourdon, Burning Bush

O sacred Lord of ancient Israel, who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush, who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain: come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.

These last days before Christmas, I'm just ready to hold sweet baby Jesus in my arms. I've longed and ached for him all of Advent and I want to hold his tiny baby body and kiss his soft baby head. And just as the baby-lover in me threatens to take over, leaving me with images of snuggling a baby that have little to do with the majesty of the Incarnation, this antiphon drops by to remind me that he is so much more than just a sweet baby, that this is so much more than just a birth.

There is in Christmas the somber promise of Good Friday. There is in the joy of the Nativity the suffering foretold by the myrrh of the Magi, the anguish of the Innocents slaughtered as the Christ child is spirited away. The wood of the manger is the wood of the Cross, and this child raised by a carpenter will hear daily the echo of the nails that will bind him to his death. The freedom we are promised by the Lord of Israel is given us by the blood of the Lamb.

There's a reason Christ was born in the dead of night, a reason we celebrate his birth in a time of barren coldness. Certainly, we see that his coming brings us into greater light. But I think we also need his coming to be surrounded by quiet and darkness and just a little bit of fear. It would feel wrong to celebrate in July, remembering with cookouts and fireworks our king born to die. In winter, our joy is tempered by the chill. We sing "Joy to the World," indeed, but also weep for the day, coming too soon, when the world will mourn. The best Christmas carols remind us of the purpose of the Christ child:

*Why lies He in such mean estate
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce him through,
The Cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word Made Flesh,
The babe, the son of Mary!*

Today's appeal to the God of Exodus carries the weight of wonder, the awe and fear that surrounded any encounter with this Lord of plagues and sacrifices and walls of water. It is this Christ whom we worship, sweet and silent in his mother's arms. The God made man to save us is the God before whom Moses cowered in fear. The freedom he wins for us is bought at a terrible price.



Do we greet this child with smiles and stockings and move on, pleased to have celebrated family and love? Or do we fall on our knees before the God born to die? Advent calls us not only to prepare for the joy of the incarnation but to repent, to recognize the gravity, the horror of a God who offers himself as a sacrifice in our stead.

In his infancy, he was given myrrh to anoint his beaten body when at last his life came to fruition. Offer him, friends, the myrrh of repentance. Anoint his tiny body, formed so perfectly to suffer so terribly, with the balm of your prayers, your acts of charity, but most especially your sins offered at the foot of his cradle, the foot of his cross. If you haven't yet been to confession this Advent, humble yourself before the God of Israel who merits all honor yet stoops to kiss your feet. Give him the gift of your wretched, sinful heart and let him return it to you whole and new.

*Oh, come, oh, come, great Lord of might,
Who to your tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times once gave the law,
In cloud and majesty and awe.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!*



Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus,

Master of both the light and the darkness,

send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas.

We who have so much to do and seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day,

We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us.

We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom.

We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence.

We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.

To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!"

Amen.

- *Henri J.M. Nouwen*

