

December 2020



The Dressing - A New Bag for You - by Marcy Lytle

It's the end of the year 2020, and I'm guessing you've not gotten yourself a new bag. Or maybe you have! But nothing picks up the mood like a new purse that you then fill and organize and carry, with all your outfits! This time, we're choosing basics – in black or brown or gray or beige – bags that look chic and sophisticated – yet practical and useful. They are timeless bags that will go with your loungewear, your dresswear, or your in between clothes that you scoot about town in. Enjoy shopping!

The Dome Satchel – It's black (two other color options), it has two carrying handles, looks sleek and classic, and it's so pretty.

https://www.target.com/p/small-dome-zip-closure-satchel-handbag-a-new-day/-/A-78655316?preselect=77460255#lnk=sametab

The Gray Zip Closure Tote – Gray goes with everything! And this bag has cute details on the handle, and a little half-moon pouch included! Look at the side zippers! These Target bags are super affordable, too!

https://www.target.com/p/vr-nyc-zip-closure-tote-handbag-with-half-moon-pouch-gray/-/A-80371680#lnk=sametab

Hobo Handbag – I love this bag – it's pricey – but it's leather. It's so pretty to carry on your elbow or over your shoulder. The flap that keeps it shut just makes the bag!

https://www.target.com/p/bolo-elaina-flap-hobo-handbag-leather/-/A-53809014#lnk=sametab

The Reversible Tote – Can't choose between brown or black? Get both, in this reversible bag that has a tie closure, and looks plain yet sophisticated, no matter what outfit you're wearing!

https://www.target.com/p/reversible-tie-closure-tote-handbag-a-new-day/-/A-79363696?preselect=78782161#lnk=sametab

Satchel Handbag - in this beautiful Cognac! This bag is a neutral color, has lots of detail, and is pretty inside and out! It's got a little more pizazz to it, if you like that sort of thing!

https://www.target.com/p/vr-nyc-zip-closure-satchel-handbag/-/A-80886299?preselect=80604639#lnk=sametab

Zip Top Tote – Maybe beige is your color. Check out this cute tote with the pocket on front! Have you had this color purse before? I have not!

https://www.target.com/p/zip-top-tote-handbag-a-new-day-8482-beige/-/A-78648041#Ink=sametab

The Backpack – These are great for travel, but now they have choices that also look great for any outfit wherever you go! This dome zip closure backpack has straight lines and doesn't look frumpy like some backpacks do. Love it!

https://www.target.com/p/dome-zip-top-commuter-backpack-a-new-day/-/A-78655319?preselect=79773469#Ink=sametab

The bag I'm carrying I got at Marshalls, and their inventory changes frequently. But check discount stores for name brand bags at half the price!

Seven for You – How We Thrived – by Marcy Lytle

2020's been quite the ride, and everyone seemingly has found some sort of "new normal" as we all continue to navigate life that is anything but normal. We thought we'd ask our panel of women what newness they've embraced that has helped them thrive during this time. Maybe you will want to try one of these suggestions as well.

Journal/Write

The one most important thing that kept me going this year has been my faith. I do a devotional every morning that my son started online last January and I started leading a women's Sunday school class during the pandemic. These keep me pretty focused in God's word. Also, I write. I work on a novel I started. I work on my blog and my column in this magazine. And I write poetry. I encourage every lady to try this. Even just writing your thoughts in a notebook or journal occasionally can be very soothing and uplift you. And you don't have to be the best at writing. It'll be fun to go back in a few months or a year and read what you were thinking.

https://mailchi.mp/f3aec7eecb56/day-1-90-days-of-prayer-12515366?e=c70207314c

Visit/Connect

I enjoyed spending time with my Mom. She lives alone outside of Manor, Texas in the country. At 84, she's in the high-risk group. Taking the drive to see her once a week, to bring her groceries, her favorite Starbucks latte, or a meal from Whataburger, made me feel so much better, We go on car rides now. We talk and laugh and just drive to nowhere in particular. For all that we may have lost during the pandemic, the most precious has been our time with those we love. Finding ways to still connect lifts our spirits and gives us hope.

This is probably a common answer, but with my family unable to visit, Zoom has been a welcomed addition to my computer and phone apps!

Read/Listen

I found a new app called Dwell. It is a scripture reading app. The app gives me the ability to listen to scripture with multiple voices, intimate background music, and customize. There are many different reading plans. Love it!

Makeover!

I renovated a bedroom! The wallpaper shown here is the original 1940's wall paper I was able to restore.

We completely cleaned our garage and made ¾ of it a playroom for the kiddos, with a coca cola theme, with comfy chairs, a TV, gumball machine, neon signs, slush machine and popcorn maker. Super pleased with how it's turned out...

Learn

Joining an online home decorating group has been such a breath of fresh air for me. The Cozy Minimalist Community and the leaders teaching videos are available three times a year to new members. Every week for six weeks there is a video posted with homework to do that helps you progress through updating a room of your choice. One of the foundations is determining your own style and working from there. They also support using pieces that you already have.

repurposing furniture, and shopping for previously owned items. And the best part...To join the community, watch the videos, and get input from thousands of people when you post a question.... Is \$10 a month only for as long as you want to be a part of the group. It has been a fun and engaging activity for someone (like me) who struggles with all things decorating.

Subscribe

I now subscribe to two deliveries that come monthly, and I've so enjoyed them arriving. Ipsy brings me a makeup bag with five new products to try, and they've been great. I love trying new makeup items but get overwhelmed, so this offers me choices and new things to try. I've found some new products I really like! I also subscribe to The Grove cleaning items and have enjoyed them as well. So far, I've loved the scents and the product availability (and they arrive so quickly!).

Focus

Having lost my husband of 45 years last October 31, just two months before Christmas, that season was really just a blur. But thanks to the healing power of God and his CONSTANTLY ABIDING spirit, this season looks much brighter, despite the lockdowns California is still experiencing. One of the things that has enabled me to press forward this year is being pastor of a church! When my husband passed away, the church elected me (100%) to assume the senior pastoral duties. While I was / am in a STEEP learning curve, even though I've worked alongside my husband in ministry for many years, it gave me something to be constantly focused upon that was very far outside of myself. I feel like I'm in a good place now, just passed one year without him, but I have hope for the future and I'm asking God for BIG things in our church! He's a BIG God, so it's no problem for Him.

Puzzles

My family has stayed so very close to me during this year and I so appreciate that! One thing that has helped me immensely, which I've never done before, is working on jigsaw puzzles. My brother-in-.law makes beautiful things from wood and he made me a large puzzle board; it has two parts, the main board to assemble the puzzle on and the smaller board to arrange the pieces on. I can leave it out on my dining table to work on, but if I need that space I can lay the smaller board on top of the larger board and store it away! I've found a particular type of puzzle is really like, called Dowdle. You can get them on Amazon and sometimes, at Costco. They are beautiful scenes and locations, which are all based on artwork done by the maker, Eric Dowdle. I've passed many evening hours alone working on them, but my grandchildren LOVE to help me and I've discovered how differently each of them approaches a puzzle! The youngest has such an unbelievable eye for finding the right SHAPE (he is COLOR BLIND!!) and fitting it into the right spot, in seconds, even I've been looking for ages! It's really amazing. Another loves the solitude it provides and asks me if I would mind if he works on it (which I don't), and yet another loves all the colors and handling all the little pieces. It's been wonderful having these puzzles to work on, either alone or with all my little helpers, which range from ages 9-11.

Getaways

Thriving during this year and its changes has been hard for me, personally. I like to be on the go, and having to stay in wasn't great fun. It helped me to have plans for each weekend to explore different parts of my town or small towns nearby. We often chose an area, and picked out a few things to do in each place like: a park, shopping, an eatery (often ate in the car) and just the architecture or scenery in that area for a drive. Getting away often to observe and enjoy helped lift my spirits greatly!

Food Experiences

This year we all ate home a lot more, or brought takeout. Instead of just eating at the table or on our laps watching TV, we tried to vary up our experiences. Sometimes, we made picnics on the floor (with tablecloth and candles and a basket), we arranged food on boards for a different setup, we set two chairs out in the family room and made a pretend theater with all the snacks and a blanket, etc. Other times, we set up the card table, added a tablecloth and vase of flowers, made a fancy dinner for two and called it a date!

In the Kitchen - Make and Share - by Marcy Lytle

It's December, and all of us are spinning, trying to wrap our heads around the fact that Christmas is so near! Baking and cooking are always part of the holiday hoopla, so why not incorporate it into gift giving as well? It's fun to give something homemade. So while you're making a batch of something, creating a board, or setting out a dinner for your family, why not make two – one to give away!?

Here are some ideas:

Granola

This recipe is one of our favorites, but we have lots of recipes we love. We make it about once every other week, and store it in these glass jars that sit on a tray, on the counter. It's easy to find these jars, fill them with the granola, and give one away to your kids or a neighbor!

Ingredients:

- 4 c old fashioned oats
- ½ c chopped pecans
- ½ c chopped walnuts
- ½ c ground flax seed
- 2 t ground cinnamon
- 1/3 c canola oil
- 2/3 c pure maple syrup
- 1 t maple flavoring (I didn't have this, just omitted it)
- 1/4 t salt

Preheat oven to 300 degrees, line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Mix oats, nuts, seed and cinnamon in a large bowl. In a small bowl, stir oil, syrup, flavoring and salt, then pour over the oat mixture and stir to coat.

Spread the mixture evenly onto the baking sheet, and bake about 40 minutes til lightly browned. Let it cool before breaking into chunks. Store in an air-tight container.

Chicken Gnocchi Pesto Soup (serves 4)

We just made this recently and it was so easy, and so good. I made the pesto ahead of time (see below) and then the soup was put together in no time at all. Just package up the ingredients, add a couple of soup bowls or a big soup spoon and a tea towel, the recipe – and another gift is done! (Obviously, just wrap up the non-refrigerated items – they can buy the rest!)

Ingredients:

- 1 jar (15 oz) roasted garlic Alfredo sauce
- 2 c water
- 2 c rotisserie chicken, roughly chopped

- 1 t Italian seasoning
- ¼ t salt
- ¼ t pepper
- 1 pkg (16 oz) potato gnocchi
- 3 c coarsely chopped fresh spinach
- 4 t prepared pesto

In a large saucepan, combine the first 6 ingredients and bring to a gentle boil, stir occasionally. Stir in gnocchi and spinach, and cook until gnocchi float, about 5 minutes. Top each serving with a dollop of pesto.

Roasted Walnut Pesto

This is the pesto I made for the above soup. It makes enough to fill a small jar. Just fill it, seal it, wrap with a bow – and keep in fridge until you're ready to give it away. It's green. And with a red bow, it just speaks Merry Christmas!

- ½ c walnuts
- 2 c fresh basil, packed leaves
- 1/3 c Pecorino Romano Cheese
- ¼ c Parmesan cheese, grated
- 2 garlic cloves
- ½ c extra virgin olive oil
- 1 T fresh lemon juice
- ¼ c fresh Italian parsley leaves, packed

Toast walnuts til just fragrant. Place all ingredients in food processor and blend til smooth. Season with salt and pepper.

Marble Cake

They used to sell this at Starbucks, and a family member really loved it. So, I found a similar recipe on line, and it worked – and was quite easy to make! It's a great loaf to set on a cutting board, wrap up and give away. It needs to be eaten right away, so that it doesn't dry out. So tasty!

Ingredients:

- 2/3 c unsalted butter at room temp
- 1 c sugar
- 3 eggs
- 2 c flour
- 1 ½ t baking powder
- ½ t baking soda
- 1/4 t kosher salt
- ½ c milk

- 2 t vanilla extract
- 3 T unsweetened cocoa powder + 1 T milk

Preheat oven to 390 degrees. Grease a 9X5 loaf pan with butter, then dust with flour.

Cream butter and sugar til light and fluffy. Add in eggs and mix.

In another bowl, sift together flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Combine with the wet ingredients and mix. Add in the milk, and mix til just incorporated.

Divide batter into two bowls. In the first bowl stir in the vanilla. In the second bowl, stir in the cocoa powder and 1 T milk.

Using a large spoon, dollop about 1/3 of the vanilla batter into pan and spread evenly. Using another spoon, dollop the chocolate batter in the middle, pushing down slightly and leaving some vanilla visible on the edges. Repeat with vanilla and chocolate as before (always leaving some vanilla visible on edges). Run a sharp knife through batter in swirling motion.

Bake for 10 minutes, then lower heat to 350, and bake 40 minutes or until cake tester comes out clean. Transfer to a cooling rack for 15 min at least, then remove from pan and slice.

A Board of Goodies

This is a fun gift, or a fun presentation for the family get together. Use a large seasonal plate as the base, make a cheese ball for the center, add grapes, nuts, crackers and dark chocolate. So good and fun! This would be a great gift to give someone as well – include the plate, crackers, nuts and chocolate – and let them provide the grapes!

Three Moms – Sheer Joy

Mom to Three, ages 9, 7 and 5:

One of the first things we do to celebrate the joy of the season is getting our tree. We typically go to a Christmas tree farm here locally, usually after thanksgiving. We get to go on a hayride and cut down a tree. It's outdoors, and the kids love picking out a tree – whether it's warm or cold, dry or rainy. It's a tradition! The trees aren't perfectly shaped. We've picked short ones, wide ones, and all shapes. This reminds me that the joy of the season is enjoying our time together and finding a tree that's fun – not cookie cutter.

We also have advent calendars, the chocolates, or sock boxes, and this encourages the kids' excitement for the season! We have a wooden activity that has a book with it, it has a wooden start that is hidden at night, then the kids find it. On Christmas Eve, the star lands on top of the manger, and we talk about the Christmas story. Another fun tradition!

This particular year, I really want to create a new tradition for our new house. Maybe a night of s'mores by our chiminea for a tradition and sing carols! I want to do a craft too, maybe the construction paper loops to hang up!

This crazy year has helped us slow down and have perspective. We do not want to miss free time to go our city's Christmas tree lighting – in our masks – because it's so fun to be with our community – even with social distancing!

Lastly, our kids pick out a new ornament each year to add to our tree!

My encouragement to all of us is that "less is more." The tree and the gifts and the decorations are not going to be perfect. My kids hang ornaments in clumps and on the back, some don't match, and some are broken. Instagram or picture perfect is not what matters. I learned it the hard way when our dog pulled out tree over and broke all our ornaments! But finally, I realized that we could get new ones, and the kids loved that process. We don't need to compare our Christmas to the Christmas of other moms.

Nothing can take away our spirit of the holidays and the spirit of Christmas. Kids will follow what we do. We can be present, and not sweat the small stuff!

Mom of Four, ages 10 on down:

For Christmas traditions and joy, we always get a Christmas tree after Thanksgiving – a real tree. In West Texas most people don't get real trees, but we found a tree farm not too far from us! They grow different, non-typical trees, as well as some of the normal types. There's a scavenger hunt, hot chocolate, etc. so we make it a fun day. Taco soup at home and decorate, so we make it a whole day excursion.

We also do an advent devotional. We found one last year that we love that's builds...it wall works together. There's a sweet opportunity to really do something for others! This brings the

message of Christmas into our home creatively. Each lesson makes a link, so when all 25 are completed, we have a link of devotionals that make a paper chain for the Christmas tree!

Mom to two little girls:

We love the idea of purposefully scheduling and thinking of joy, because it's easy to get stressed with getting the "perfect" tree, getting gifts wrapped and being busy.

My kids are young, and we are just now starting new traditions with our little girls. One thing we decided that at the end of the year we will close our office for two weeks. We own a dental office and we've committed to having time with our family, unwind and close! This brings us joy most – being with our family. We have to *intentionally* schedule that time – to close – and we are!

Another joyful thing we do is planning a fun activity, nothing that costs too much, but just fun! While living in Alaska, we visited an ice sculpture museum. This year we have scheduled with our girls and some friends to ride the Great Smoky Mountain Railroad – the Polar Express! It runs through the mountains of North Carolina. WE will dress up in Christmas pajamas, having cookies, read the Christmas story, all dressed up and joyful!

The last thing I love is baking – the girls and me! We love making homemade chocolate chip cookies for Santa, casseroles and comfort food. We love making Monkey bread and banana nut bread, again!

One more thing – the Advent Calendar – chocolate ones! My aunt started this tradition for me, and I've continued it through early year of marriage, and now with my kids. When we open up a chocolate, we say something that brings us joy – the number one joy being Jesus!

Tried and True – Wrapping and Stacking – by Marcy Lytle

How do you wrap your gifts? I feel like I've done it so many ways! We've wrapped where each person has his/her own paper, or their own color of ribbon, or even their photo on their name tag! That was a lot of work! Some use all gift bags, so that no wrapping is involved. That sounds lovely, except I've found that gift bags don't stack very well under the tree. And one year we had color coordinated solids and prints so that they looked pretty.

This year we're wrapping with newspaper! Yes, we STILL take the printed newspaper and we started saving it all a month or so ago, so that we'd have enough to wrap. I did it to save money on wrapping paper, to be useful by recycling, and I thought the black and white would be pretty – with colorful ribbon wrapped around!

Michaels has bunches of stray ribbons in a bundle for sale, and I found some pretty colored ribbons (to match my home décor) earlier in the year, so I have a stash. I also have some neutral bows in whites, silvers and grays. I used a few bows, but I've found that bows prohibit stacking, as well!

For name tags, I plan to just write their names on the newspaper with a thick tip marker.

For placing the gifts under the tree, we put the larger boxes near the back to use as bases and stackers, and go from there. But it could also be fun to place little piles of gifts around the entire room, so they're not all under the tree. It's even fun to hide some tiny gifts among the branches of the tree!

I absolutely love wrapping gifts. I love snacking, watching a Christmas movie, hearing the crackling of a fire or listening to holiday music...while taping and cutting and tying the ribbon round and round.

Wrapping gifts can be so stressful, or it can be one of the most relaxing things we do this season. So why not MAKE it relaxing.

We can:

Wrap a few gifts each night

Have a gift-wrapping date or family night

Designate one room as the wrapping room so it's not all over the house

Wrap little gifts in fabric or bandannas (hey, I think I'll add that to my wrap!) with twine

Leave some gifts unwrapped and just covered with a blanket

Breathe and enjoy and pray for each person as you wrap

Dance after every few gifts that are completed

Smile often and give thanks for what you can give and what will have to wait

However you wrap or don't wrap, figure out a way to make it pleasant this year. Don't stress to make it perfect. But do enjoy the giving, not of just the gift, but of the process that it takes to give that gift to the ones you love.



Practical Parenting – Grace to Run – by Marcy Lytle

Here's the story of my husband's experience with coming to faith in Jesus. He was 7 years old and sitting on the back seat of a church, next to an elderly man. My husband's parents were busy serving and singing, so there Jon sat with this old man, as he listened. It was near the end of the service when an old hymn was playing, I think it was "Just as I Am." Something in the lyrics or maybe something the pastor had said before the song, or perhaps something in the atmosphere struck, and struck this little boy hard.

He realized that he needed Jesus. It was like he knew that he needed a Savior, and when the pastor asked for anyone to come, Jon went. In fact, he ran. He said he ran down to the front and fell on his knees and wept, as Jesus welcomed him and received him...and has now kept him for decades since.

I'm telling you this story to encourage you parents to give your kids space and time to run. The best way to do this is by:

- Living as an example of one that loves Jesus. Not perfectly, but humbly and simply loving Him and loving others.
- Attending church (virtually or at home or in person) faithfully, not out of a have-to, but because you want to be there with others – no matter how flawed you all may be – to worship Him.
- Playing music to fill the air of your home with lyrics that speak to the soul and lift up His name
- Allowing quiet time to reflect, as a family, away from the madness...in the still of nature or the quiet of reading.
- Showing them unconditional love with boundaries too, leading them and pointing them to His love.
- Giving them plenty of hugs, affirmation, instruction, and time...demonstrating the love of their Father.
- Asking forgiveness and offering it freely, when wrongs have been done and tears have been shed.

Some say coming to faith in Jesus as a child doesn't stick. But it stuck with my husband. He remembers that Sunday morning clearly and distinctly, and if you ask him about it, he might tear up – because it was that amazing and tender and holy – when Jesus became real.

My husband has the most amazing faith and peace of anyone I know. And I believe it all started with the grace and the space to run.

Give that gift to your kids this season, and ask Jesus to sing and woo them to his feet, where he will kindly lift them to his lap and hold them forever.

A Night to Remember – Dormant December – by Marcy Lytle

Do your kids know what dormant means? It's a good time of year to teach them this word! It's when things slow down for a bit, they don't grow, but they will reappear soon. It's a good time of year to show them the things that are dormant in the yard, and then talk about this funny word as you come in for hot cocoa and the story of Jesus' birth.

Preparation: The family will just need paper and colored markers and/or pens!

Take the kids on a yard tour:

Show them how grass doesn't really grow high in the winter, because it's dormant.

Talk about, and ask them, about the animals they know that hibernate in the winter and why.

Point to the trees that have lost their leaves and talk about the root system that keeps them alive so that they bloom again come spring.

Take the kids inside by the fire:

Tell them the story of Jesus birth as they listen (you can use a manger scene, or let the kids draw as you share)

Long before Jesus was ever born, his birth was foretold. This means that God spoke to people about the coming Savior of the World and inspired them to home and believe. The world was a mess, and people needed hope! You could say their faith was dormant. Many heard about Jesus and hoped he would come, but over time they grew weary in believing.

Is there something you hope for, but it seems to never come? Like maybe Christmas morning? It takes a whole 365 days to wait for it!

Have the kids write 365 on their paper:

A year of 365 days is a long time to wait for Christmas morning!

Finally, it was time for Jesus to be born. An angel spoke to a young lady named Mary and she became pregnant with God's son – not because she was married to a man yet – but because God give her this special gift to be Jesus' mother. And Jesus was born, just like it was foretold for years and years before. The Savior had come. The One who would bring hope to the world!

Ask the kids to draw the baby in a manger:

How do you feel when Christmas finally comes? We all can barely sleep because we are so excited!

That's the way those who had believed and hoped felt, when they heard the news that baby Jesus was born! Their dormant faith (remember it's when something sleeps for a bit but then is awakened and alive again.) The wise men walked a far distance, as their faith was inspired by the news that Jesus the Savior was born.

Have the kids add the big star in the sky that the wise men followed:

Jesus' birth brought to life all the years of waiting and waiting, and now the Savior of the World lives forever and ever. We never have to wait, like they did. He lives among us, in us, and for us. Isn't that awesome?

We've been waiting a long time for Christmas, and every year, it finally comes. Our hope that sometimes goes dormant (to sleep for a bit) is suddenly awakened on Christmas Eve, when we go to sleep awaiting all the gifts under the tree!

Ask the kids to draw a Christmas tree:

The best part of Christmas is awakening the faith in all of us that Jesus came, the Savior of the World, God's only son, to save us all if we just believe, love Him most, and love others well.

Let each child share their pictures and ask them again what dormant means, and remind them that there's always good in waiting...even in the dead of winter...for life to appear. And it always will, because Jesus lives in our hearts forever and ever. Amen.

I Don't Do Teens - Holiday Happiness - by Marcy Lytle

Attitude is in your face, isn't it, when you're raising teenagers? And one attitude that seems to surface during the holidays is that of not wanting to hang with the family. Or maybe your teen feels too old to participate with the younger kiddos present, or uninterested in the older folks, or unwilling to help out without a gripe and a long sigh... I suppose attitude comes with the teenage years, but having it surface during the holidays is not fun for anyone, especially Mom!

Maybe, just maybe, a few tips can help out with making the season merry and bright, whether you have a mix of ages in kiddos, are visiting an aging grandparent, or need help with the baking, or are hoping that Christmas morning is all smiles from everyone!

- Sit down and have a family talk. Communicate what is expected from each family member, and the attitude you'd like to see go with that action. Let them speak and tell how they feel, then you share how you feel, and come to a family agreement. Communication helps.
- Give teens a task. Don't just assume he/she will hop up and help you set the table, or clean their room, or show up for the Hallmark movie watching. Let them be in charge of a few things, give them ownership. Maybe they can put together a food board, or create a centerpiece, or plan a family night. If they help plan, maybe they'll smile when the plan comes together!
- Make schedules. It might help to have a calendar with dates and even daily times, where teens are allowed to retreat to their rooms for down time, and other times where they are required to be present with family. Hang a family calendar, so teens know what's coming and what to expect.
- Listen to them. If he really stomps about and she throws a fit when you tell them you need help, or an event is about to take place, listen to their feelings. Maybe there's a real problem you can all address, together. Listening is half the battle.
- Pray together. They might snarl at this one, but bring the family together and pray about the upcoming weeks. Ask each family member to give thanks, as you pray together for others and thank Him for the opportunity to give, expecting nothing in return.
- Plan to Give. Don't exclude your teens when you give. Include them. Let them wrap the bread you're delivering, find the directions to that elderly person's home, make cards, or do something so that they feel a part of the gift as well.
- Thank Them. Thank your teens when you see them get a job done, hold their head high, bite their tongue, or smile through a less than exciting event. Tell them how much you appreciate them and love them. I promise, those seeds are being planted, and they are taking root, even if you can't see the fruit just yet.

Holidays are a blast, but they can be ruined with a foul attitude from our teens, our spouse, or ourselves! And for sure, someone is bound to slip up, so offer grace, pull together as a family, and look around at the lights, the hope, and the glory of Christmas.

Chipped China - Engaging the Senses this Season - by Jennifer Lytle

We have been given God's Word to experience, understand, and come to know His personhood. We have also been given a physical body with the ability to engage in knowing Him as well. May this season bring you what you need most to find restoration in those areas of your life that have been out of balance.

We can engage our senses to find joy in our present moment. Grounding, mindfulness, and being present are some of activities that we can partake in to enjoy the life we have been given, the one we are living. Should you find your mind roaming to the far corners of . . . whatever normally pre-occupies your thoughts, I encourage you to take stock using your senses.

Sight

Thank you, God, for the beautiful lights of this season. Soft lights are everywhere – from candles to tree lights. They twinkle, blink, and make a silent movie. Thank you, God, for the gift of sight. Open my eyes so I can see your wonder and glory around me today. Amen.

Sound

Thank you, Jesus, for the sounds of laughter and children. It is such a gift to be able to hear giggling, chatting, and joviality. Thank you, Jesus, for the sounds of wind through the branches of the trees, against bells and chimes. Thank you, Jesus, for giving me ears to hear. May you remove any blockage that has kept me hearing your wonder, promises, or instruction. Amen.

Smell

Thank you, Lord, for the aromas of food! Thank you, Lord, for even the smell of fire. Thank you for the refreshing smell of Cedar trees and the memories they bring. May my praises be a sweet aroma to you.

Touch

Thank you, Lord, for the ability to touch Pine needles and Cedar leaves. I feel the prickly needles, the softness and sharpness of the Cedar. Thank you for the warm embrace of family and friends. Thank you for the extended hand that I can touch and hold. Thank you, Lord, for your physical touch in my heart and body.

Taste

Thank you, Father, for the taste of chocolate, spices, and coffee. Thank you for supplying food for my family today. Thank you for the ability to discern sweet from sour and sharp from mild. Help me, Father, to taste your goodness.

After engaging the senses in a simple practice of experience, the body relaxes, and the brain has begun to use the prefrontal cortex. If this exercise helped you, I would be delighted to hear about your experience!

An Adage a Day - Tis the Season - by Carole Gilbert

Tis the season for joy, laughter, love, smiles, and good food. It is also the season for presents, but presents come in many forms and fashions. This season, as some believe, started with Thanksgiving, and goes through the New Year. And, throughout it, we hear the phrase "Tis the Season." It started in a Christmas Carol, *Deck the Halls*, from 1862. Today it is used so much more and year-round but saying it does bring that song to mind. "Tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la la, la la la la..."

I use this phrase often throughout the year, not just during the holidays. When my beloved summer turns to the chill of fall, it is "Tis the season." When my allergies start acting up, "Tis the season." When my neighbor brings me an abundance of home-grown squash, "Tis the season." I only hope I have Jesus in mind when I think of this phrase. He really is the reason for every season.

But let us be honest. It has been a hard year. This year has impacted everyone in some way to some extent. We have all been randomly displaced at some time or another and it is not over. So how do we find joy and laughter from such a wayward year? We must remember the reason for the season. We must look at our families and remember the opportunities we had to get to know each other so much better. We must think of each smile we have shared with someone. Maybe that someone was in your family or maybe it was someone you have given a helping hand to or an encouraging word to. And then we must be thankful for God's provisions, the good food He has and will continue to give us. It may not have been what we wanted when we wanted it, but it was provided.

It might have been a little difficult at times to feel God's provisions through this year, but He was there. He always makes sure we have what we need if we believe. Tis the season to believe. Tis always the season to believe. All of that should give us joy and if we look back, we can probably think of some situation through it all that will make us smile or even laugh. I know I can. I smile and laugh over the joy my family gets swinging in the swing I made from a broken glider I found on the side of the highway during my shelter in place. I smile over having to try a new makeup because my brand was no longer available during the pandemic and the new brand is cheaper. And I love the memories made during what seemed like endless days that I got to spend with my husband while we were made to stay at home. That time added moments of fondness and so many laughs to our life together.

So whatever care or worry we may have left for this year, let us put it aside and think, "Tis the season."

Tis the season to remember the birth of Jesus. To remember Him as the greatest present of all and from the greatest giver, our God. And this great present lasts for eternity complete with all the joy, laughter, love, and smiles. And it is only by God's love and mercy that we can have it. And for that reason alone, we can be jolly, fa la la la la la la.

James 1:17

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

Happy Holidays!

Tiny Living – The Best Choice – by Leyanne Enterline

Rejoice!

Rejoice!

And again I say, "Rejoice!"

That has actually not been my word for this season we have been in, but something I so need to continually practice.

I ended my last story with saying we will rejoice in the small things. So I started really thinking about that. I get so frustrated living so tiny and not having enough space for "things."

But in the long run, are we closer as a family? Yes.

Do we have lots of good talks and movie nights and just hang out times? Yes.

We have nowhere to go! So when this is all over and we can spread out again one day, I'm sure I'll look back and see what a blessing this actually was.

I am beyond thankful that my parents let us wash our clothes at their place, but does that get exhausting? Yes. Driving back and forth consistently throughout the week is a bit of a pain. But I am rejoicing in my little bit of quiet time. I try to take advantage of that drive and listen to church messages or sing praise and worship or just have some peace and quiet. It's only a five minute drive, but with all the stinky baseball clothes that drive multiplies into maybe five, five minute drives, back and forth. So I will rejoice with my peaceful drive.

I also started to look more at my surroundings. I usually just drive to my parents' house without paying attention, besides making sure a deer doesn't try to commit suicide! I really feel like they play a game with me! Galloping out in front of me and the last second trying to give me a heart attack! On my drive, I started to notice the beautiful pieces of land. Most homes out here are on a couple of acres and it's been fun to really look at what people have turned their property into. Most have beautiful homes on their land, with workshops, but some have ratty, old lake homes that have not been updated but have lots of character. Close by us there are cows, donkeys, mules, goats...so fun to see!

So when I get frustrated at our situation, I will do my best to choose to do what?

Rejoice!



Healthy Habits – Daily Three – by Marcy Lytle

I've realized over the past year how healthy it's been to offer thanks. I started on January 1 journaling three things a day that I'm thankful for and I continued all year to 1000. This activity was prompted when I read *A Thousand Gifts* by Ann Voskamp. I learned so much about myself and God, and felt like my heart grew two sizes as I went on this journey of training my heart to be thankful, observe what it was I was thankful for, and then write it down. It became a habit, a healthy one, and here's why I think it's healthy to continue:

- I realized that mostly I thanked God for the obvious (food, clothes, shelter) but overlooked the hidden (a wave, a text, a piece of chocolate).
- It took time each day to reflect upon, think about, and then write about what it was that I
 was thankful for.
- Giving thanks for three things turned my heart upward when perhaps it had been downward all day long.
- Three things, on some days, were hard to find after I'd journaled hundreds, but I kept looking, because I wanted them to all be different.
- Often, my thanksgivings were just for temporal trivial things, but nonetheless, they made me smile at His attention to detail in my life with blessings in the leaves swaying in the wind, or the fact that a package arrived so soon...
- It was a great year to do this exercise, as it was a year that I could have easily focused on all the negative; but giving thanks shifted my focus to the good.
- Journaling thanksgivings in a pretty book has given me reference, a place to look back on, and place to grow from, as I start 2021.

I'm hoping to journal again 1000 thanks, but next year I'm going to be more purposeful to really look at life, creation, my heart, others, and so many more beautiful gifts in the world and notice every intricate detail of my Father's hand at work in all of it. I'm hoping that I will look forward to this daily exercise as much as I look forward to a big bucket of popcorn, knowing the satisfaction and thrill it will bring when I'm through.

Healthy habits aren't just running and bending and eating and minimalizing, although that's mostly what we're told that brings us good health. Healthy habits include daily noticing, thanking, praising and growing as we realize how full our hearts really are when we stop to acknowledge the One at work making them pump steadier and stronger.

Strengthening Your Core - Peer Pressure - for Adults - by Marcy Lytle

Peer pressure is usually something we see in teens, we teach our teens to not succumb to it, and we are greatly grieved when they do! However, I think peer pressure as an adult, on into our aging years, is still present and still just as detrimental to our mental, spiritual and physical health! Hopefully, we've outgrown the pull to do bad things with a bad crowd of friends, but what about the pull to perform or produce?

The Christmas season is a time when the pressure is on, and here are a few reminders to steer clear and stay true to who you are and what's best for your family:

Maybe they're not giving gifts this year, or they've "outgrown" gift giving and only give to the littles. That's fine. But if you still enjoying giving and getting and all that jazz, do it. Don't let what they do sway you.

Maybe she's decorating her house with five Christmas trees, baking cookies and freezing them, and doing all the things and you start to feel anxious that you won't even get your one tree up before Christmas. Lay that anxiety aside in favor of savoring the season.

Maybe she's just handed you a homemade gift she's put together for you, and you have nothing to give her in return. Don't run out and grab something, just say thank you and enjoy that something.

Maybe this pandemic has you staying cautious and you're not gathering and socializing, like they are with their friends and family. They can't believe you're "living in fear." Shed those judgments like water off a duck's back and rest in what you know to be best for you and yours...

Maybe she's started a diet plan and talks about it constantly and how much weight she's shed, and you're in your kitchen baking homemade bread because you want to. Enjoy that homemade bread, and let her enjoy her new self...and continue to be friends.

Maybe she's spent thousands on a home renovation and she's showing pictures on social media of her closet that's bigger than your family room, and you start looking at your home with downer eyes. Lift up your eyes and give thanks for the beauty that's yours, in your home, and your space.

Maybe she's lonely, this other friend lost her job, a neighbor has Covid and your own parent is declining, and you feel an ungodly amount of pressure to give all and be all and do all to help all. You can't. But He can. And he will help you choose wisely, and leave the rest up to HIM.

I don't know what makes you feel peer pressure. If you never feel any, I'm applauding your maturity. But many of us still do, from time to time, when we listen, watch and hear what others are doing – and then we gripe, feel less than, and pity our own situation.

Tis the season to rejoice and give thanks in all things, and it's amazing what those two things will do to bring peer pressure down to a low simmer and eventually calm waters...

Merry Christmas.

Life Right Now – Quite at Peace – by Bethany Gomez

I am sad to announce that this will be my last article for a little while...

This decision of course caused me to look back over my writing journey. My very first article came out June of 2018. I was shocked to discover that it has been almost two in a half years of writing my "Life Right Now" articles each month which amounts to almost 30 articles! I couldn't have done this for as long as I did without the most amazing editor, Marcy Lytle. I'm so thankful she gave me the opportunity to encourage others with my writing. I hope that I have. It has been an honor to be a part of this uplifting magazine. I am sincerely so sad that this will not be a part of my life anymore, but maybe down the road I will get another chance to write again.

However, writing does not come easy to me and I wouldn't say it is one of my favorite past times or hobbies. However, my confidence level has slowly increased over these years, thanks in large part to Marcy. I'm a perfectionist, so I began this writing journey thinking my writing was not good enough at all. But she kept affirming me that it was indeed good and that I had a great writing voice that is honest and relatable, and that my writing was not just a rambling mess! (Like this sentence!) I'm still not 100% sure my writing is that great. I even think saying it's "good" is being generous, but for the most part I have been able to overcome these nagging perfectionist thoughts, with the help of God. Otherwise, I have a feeling that I would've quit writing, a while back.

Also, I remember mentioning in a past article about how being vulnerable is really kind of scary. It is like handing over your journal for others to read. It has been quite the challenge sometimes to muster up enough courage to write my thoughts, my life updates, my fears, my successes, my failures, or my feelings for other people to read. I sometimes worried what people might think of me. But like I have said before, if my writing helps one person to feel like they are not alone or encourages anyone to get to know Jesus better, then that is what helps my fears dissipate. I have to work hard to remember that the only one whose thoughts of me I should care about, is Jesus'. He even knows all the things I don't share, and yet He still loves me.

With all that said, I honestly cannot believe that this is the last month in the year that no one saw coming; that is, except for God. He knew what would happen this year and every year before and every year after, which is very comforting to me. It has been a trying year for me, for people close to me, for so many. And I'm sure, in one way or another, 2020 has been hard for everyone. I believe that God doesn't cause pain and suffering; I will believe that to my dying day. Pain and suffering is the result of living in a fallen world. God so desires us to draw closer to Him during times of great loss or suffering, so that He can comfort us. I am under no impression that when this year ends that life will be rainbows and sunshine. No, this next year will have troubles of its very own, but I know that God will walk with me through it all.

Hebrews 13:6 says,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

Since this is my last article of the year, I would like to share my one and only New Year's resolution:

I want to draw closer to God. I want to walk in His will for my life and deepen my relationship with Him more than ever before.

This is it. You know the saying, "All good things must come to an end." Instead, I would have to say, "All good things come from God and with Him there are no ends, just seasons! This

season of writing for me has finished, but maybe God knows and I'm quite at peace with that.	another one will	spring up down	the road. Only

Life in a Nutshell - Off the Candy Cane Hook - by Jill Montz

Fall is by far my favorite time of the year. September 1st you will find me dripping in sweat from the Texas second summer heat as I dig through the dozens of orange and green storage tubs stacked floor to ceiling in my backyard storage shed. After hours of lifting off tops and peering inside, I drag out dozens of metal decorative pumpkins in an array of sizes, shapes, and shades of orange. After that are the several pairs of scarecrows with their straw sticking out from underneath patched hats and protruding from shirt sleeves and pants legs. They look a little worn but that just gives them more character! We greet each other with a smile as I adjust their pieces of straw and carry them to the front yard. Next I'm off to the garden center. Although my flower beds are still bursting with pinks, reds, and violets from my Gerber daisies, lantanas, begonias, and petunias, I happily shop for yellow, maroon, and purple mums to add to my summer blend. With just a glance at my front yard, it is easy to see fall is most certainly my favorite.

By the time I flip the calendar to October, I am once again rummaging through tubs in my storage shed and find my tubs filled with happy Halloween friends and fiends. My smile rivals that of the happiest jack-o-lantern! I love to fill my home and yard with silly ghosts, friendly goblins, green-faced witches with big moles on their noses, and crooked smiling pumpkins. All these favorites find their way to crowded book shelves and fireplace mantles or get tucked in amongst piles of pumpkins and mums. Then, all I have to do is shop for the trick-or-treat candy and demand restraint from my daughter, Dotty, and myself so we don't eat it all before Halloween night.

November brings cooler temperatures and a busier work schedule for me, so when it's time to change out for Thanksgiving décor I usually gather up my Halloween treasures hurriedly one dark evening after work. I pile them up on my back porch and throw a sheet over them to protect them from the elements and to protect me from seeing them when I pass the window. My pumpkins and scarecrows from September welcome the addition of a few fat turkeys to the mix. "Tom the Turkey" is our six-foot blowup pal who sits prominently in the front yard for the thirty days of fame he gets each year. He welcomes me home after each long workday with a wobble of his oversized head and a wave of his nylon tail. Fall is still my favorite, but, like the leaves on the trees, I am just barely hanging on some days.

Christmas is a whole other story. Come December I am running on Dr. Pepper, Aleve, and very little sleep. My Christmas cheer is reserved for the hours of 9am to 5pm and for the customers who come in to shop at the Pecan Shed (our family's retail store). When the closed sign is put up, so is my holly jolly spirit for the evening. I am not quite the Grinch, but I'm definitely a not too distant cousin.

Over the years, Dotty and I have put up a Christmas tree adorned with family ornaments and the cherished creations Dotty made in elementary school classrooms. These parental keepsakes are decorated with love by little hands and lots of glue and glitter that still flakes off on the floor almost five years later. Some years I've even unboxed my grandmother's Christmas village and told Dotty stories of Grandma Montz and her house this time of year. I love sharing my memories of my grandma with Dotty, laughing at the funny ones and wiping away a tear at the tender ones. Sharing these memories helps me to build new memories with Dotty and for that I am always grateful.

There have been years when the tinsel of the tree, the tangle of lights, and the pile of gifts have filled my home by early December. And then there have been those years where Dotty has

asked me on December 20th if we are even going to have a Christmas at all. One year when I had moved that summer into a new home next to a Catholic church, the elderly nuns there came over with rosaries in hand to basically ask me if I knew Jesus. I was confused at first. With furrowed brows and concerned eyes they stated how I seemed to really celebrate Halloween but not Christmas. As they patted my dry cracked knuckles with their soft age spotted hands, I stifled a laugh and quickly hurried into my house to grab my nativity scene (luckily it was close at hand but sadly it was still in the box). With a tired smile I assured them I did in fact know Jesus and was just very busy with work in December. I promised them that even though my house was dark and undecorated, my heart and soul were filled with the light and love of Jesus Christ. I'm sure I was still on their prayer list but in December I will take all the prayers I can get!

Last Christmas was our first with our adorable new kitten, Rae. We soon discovered a Christmas tree is to a cat what Mount Everest is to a thrill seeking outdoor enthusiast. No matter what I tried, Rae climbed in, knocked over, and chewed through every Christmas item we owned. So after several "bad kitty" scoldings, a dozen replaced strands of Christmas lights, and two fake trees later, we decided to just hang our stockings inside the house. Even Rae got one although she was definitely on the Naughty List. Then we decorated the front yard with a trio of merry blowup friends and called it good enough to make the Nice List that year.

When the middle of January rolled around this year, I finally had the strength, courage, and resolve to lift the sheet on the back porch. Dotty and I spent a long, blustery cold Sunday afternoon packing away four months' worth of decorations. The holiday favorites found their way back into tubs and back into the storage shed in the backyard. After much exhaustion, frustration, and a few Grinch approved curse word, I declared through chattering teeth, "No decorating in 2020! None. Zip. Zero. Zilch. Nada. And for our German friends down the block, Nein!"

Dotty knows not to speak too much when I get in this mood. She has learned over the years to go blank-faced and robotic. It's her survival mode and it breaks my heart to see it and know I have helped her hone it over the years. Without any emotion and in just the smallest whisper she asked, "Can we at least hang our stockings?" That question stopped me in mid tantrum. I sighed and softened and hugged her close to say I was sorry for giving her yet another reason to spend hard earned money on a counselor's couch and said, "Of course we can. I wonder which tub they are in?" Dotty softly replied, "I think they are in the green long tub." I took a deep breath and then I turned her to face me. With both of my chilled hands placed firmly on the padded shoulders of her winter coat I asked, "What do you say we get new Christmas stockings this year?" And with that she broke out into a big grin. Perhaps this particular adventure in parenting will only take up a few minutes of the counseling session someday and not the full hour. Fingers crossed.

So this year when September rolled around, I stayed nice and cool as I napped to the sound of Hallmark movies and Rae purring on my lap. When the calendar flipped to October I enjoyed the sights as my neighbors' yards turned orange, green, black and purple with Halloween décor, but mine stayed tucked away in the backyard shed. I did get some pumpkins from my brother who has a pumpkin patch every year between the rows of our pecan trees. November was the same. Tom and his friends never left their plastic beds in the shed and I wasn't too sad about it. However, now is the real test. While Christmas comes with a mixed bag of emotions for me and is laced with exhaustion, lack of sleep, and too many empty calories, I have never gone a year with absolutely no effort to decorate and celebrate. We will have stockings. But that's it. No

tinsel, no tree, no reindeer, no wreaths, no glitter, no glue, no big to-do. This year my *house* will not celebrate Christmas, but my goal is that Dotty and I will.

My hopes are that by letting myself off the candy cane hook of Christmas decorating guilt I can enjoy more of what makes the holiday extra special. Instead of spending the free nights we have digging through tubs, untangling lights and yelling at the cat, I pray we find time to snuggle up close and talk about what's on our hearts and minds. Instead of dragging out extension cords, I hope we can't drag ourselves away from spending time with family and friends. Instead of filling our house with memories of Christmas past, I hope we make lots of new memories beyond the walls of our home. Like the Grinch realized, so will we...

"What if Christmas doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more."

Of course this grand idea of not decking the halls, walls, or walkways might backfire on me. I might realize that Dotty and I miss the tinsel and the tangle even if it comes with a little tantrum and some childhood trauma. If that's the case, then I can always fling open the backyard shed. Or we can head to the holy land of all things that glitter...Hobby Lobby. Because the truth about Christmas is a child was born who came to save us all from our sins. Jesus came, offering love and forgiveness. And this year I plan to offer that as well...especially to myself.

Strategic Women – From Harlot to Heroine – by Debbie Haynes

There are a couple of peculiar facts about a woman named Rahab, one being her dubious career. Her home was built into a wall and many scholars agree that she ran an inn of questionable repute from her home, with nighttime traffic constantly taking place. She was written about as being one of the four most beautiful women of her time. The second odd fact about her is her bloodline. She is named in the direct ancestral bloodline of Jesus!

Rahab's story is found in the book of Joshua, chapters 2-6. There's a man named Joshua who is told three times by God to be strong and of good courage, as he was about to move the Children of Israel into Jericho – a very old city, and the lowest point in the world – next to the Dead Sea. They would have to cross the Jordan River in treacherous waters. He was to prepare food, move forward by night, arm strong warrior men, and...send two spies to the house of the harlot, Rahab, to scout out the enemy and the land. Perhaps, since there was so much traffic in and out of her house, the spies wouldn't attract attention. However, these guys were spotted, and the King demanded of Rahab to know who the men were and where they were!

Let's first look at Rahab's qualities, before we finish that story. She was an astute business woman, she knew how to negotiate a contract, she was brave and strong, an excellent judge of character, smart and forward-thinking, loyal and loving and ALREADY had a strong faith in the God of Israel. Read Chapter 2:8-11 and realize that Rahab knew who the spies were; why they were at her house, that she could trust them and that she was chosen to help them!

Back to the story...

Rahab hides these spies on her roof underneath the drying wheat and barley stalks that were there, because it was harvest time. In verses 9-11 she makes a profession of her faith in God to the men. She then boldly and bravely negotiates for her life and all that is hers, so that she and her household will be spared. She tells the men how to escape by being lowered down on a scarlet cord from her window!

When the King's men came to capture the visitors, she confessed that she had seen them but that they had left a short time go, and if the men hurried they could catch up to them. However, the gates of the city were locked down til morning (as was the custom) and she had given the visitors instructions to escape to the mountain and wait three days. The plan worked!

That scarlet cord of escape is often said to be symbolic in many ways – it showed that Rahab's home was an inn of nighttime activity – BUT it also represented the thread or the blood of the Lamb – that saves us all from death! That cord meant safety and salvation for Rahab and her family, and it was physically an escape for the men, so they could accomplish God's plan.

Joshua and the people were then able to cross over the river, march around the walls of the city of Jericho until they fell, and all inhabitants were killed – EXCEPT for Rahab and her family!

Even though this woman was of ill repute, she had a faith that saved her out of destruction – and was escorted into the promised land and lived there. She married, gave birth to a son

named Boaz who married Ruth, who gave birth to Obed that had a son named Jesse – who had a son named David. This fulfilled the scripture that said Christ would be from the lineage of David!

This woman Rahab would be an unlikely candidate perhaps by our own standards, for being chosen and then succeeding; yet she played a pivotal role in the success of the nation of Israel and in continuing the bloodline of Jesus!

Our past doesn't matter. It's why Jesus came. God uses those he trusts, regardless of who we are or what we have done. God REDEFINES our past and makes us his chosen sons and daughters. From bad girl to beautiful bride, from harlot to heroine, that's Rahab! She could have remained in shame, sin and hopelessness, but Jesus in her bloodline came to conquer all that.

- Roman 8:1 says we have no condemnation in Christ.
- I John 1:19 says if we confess sin, he forgives.
- I Peter 1:3 states we have hope in the resurrected Christ.
- John 8:34 says those in Christ are free!

Finally, in the New Testament in Hebrews 11:31 we read again about Rahab, the harlot, that ended up in the Hall of Faith – a strategic woman honored by God. She was not out of His reach, and neither are we. God's grace extends to us ALL.



In This Together - Sacrificial Love – by Kaelin Scott

"The prince married the princess, and they lived happily ever after..."

As an author of Christian romance, I know how tempting it can be to buy into the idea of happily ever after. We don't like loose ends or unresolved conflict, and we like to think that life's a breeze once we say, "I do." But life isn't a fairytale, and marriage is hard. It's not a fix-all for life's problems, but rather a partnership in getting through them. So many people today give up on marriage as soon as it gets tough or when honeymoon feeling fades away, but love isn't supposed to be a feeling. True love is a choice you make every single day.

It's choosing to stand by your spouse no matter what. There's a reason wedding vows include, "for better or for worse." Hard times will happen; it's a fact of life. But true love means sticking together through it all. Sometimes it means compromise, and sometimes it means sacrifice. And yes, those are two very uncomfortable things. I'm betting that Jesus wasn't comfortable when He died for us, but that was the ultimate sacrifice of love. John 15:13 says, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." That's what Jesus did for us, and it's what He expects us to do for our spouses.

I think what people get so wrong about marriage is thinking it's all about themselves. It's not. It's about a covenant with God, and it's about putting someone else before yourself. It's not about being happy or going on romantic getaways all the time. Those are great things, but they don't define marriage. Marriage is going through all of life's ups and downs and still choosing each other at the end of each day. Maybe you don't really like each other sometimes. But you can still choose to love. Maybe you don't agree with the other about something. But you can still choose to support their decisions. Maybe you feel unappreciated or misunderstood. But you can still pray for your spouse.

In a culture that elevates self-importance and getting what you want, we have to turn to the source of truth – God's Word. That's the only place with solid marriage advice. Not TV or music or Facebook. God designed marriage to enhance and enrich our lives, but we have to treat it the right way. Thankfully, He gave us an instruction manual to show us the way!

Sometimes we have to stand beside our spouse and go to battle together. Is it hard and scary? Yes. But victory doesn't come through division, and you'll never get there if you give up. Put on your armor and choose to fight for your partner. And while you do, God will surely fight for you.

"Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Ephesians 5:2

Date Night Fun – December Romance – by Marcy Lytle

I'm not usually happy with date night at home. But I've had to learn to be more so, this past year. Dinner and a movie on the sofa all evening is not appealing to me, sometimes. I like to be busy, have purpose, do something fun, and sometimes staying at home seems lackluster and boring. I know you can relate, because we've all been home so much! So we've put together five date nights at home this December that we hope you'll enjoy and try! After all, home is where the heart is...right? We've even included ideas for what to wear!

<u>Lights around Town</u> – Pick a few neighborhoods, pack up a car picnic, and set out to look at lights. This is a yearly tradition for many with children, but why not just the two of you, as well? In your picnic basket include cranberry chicken salad sandwiches and a fruit salad, as well as some Jr Mints (Christmas ones!). Make this date last as long as you like, and why not wear all black and white, with a touch of red, just for fun!

https://flavormosaic.com/cranberry-chicken-salad-sandwich/

<u>Wrapping and Snacking</u> – Make Oreo candy cane bark together and place in the fridge. Set out the gifts and have a wrapping party. For snacks, put together a food board (see recipe on the TIPS page!) Set up your card table, get out your wrapping supplies and enjoy the gifting. Talk about each person you're wrapping for, and what you love about them. Consider wearing your ugly Christmas sweater or Santa Hat, or jingle bells, for this date night in.

https://www.heb.com/recipe/recipe-item/oreo-candy-cane-bark/1398764176767

<u>Fireplace Chat</u> – Even if you don't have a fireplace, you can light candles in a group, so that you have a flicker nearby. A fireplace chat is usually a "ask me anything" type venue, so ask away! If you need help, print out some great couples questions for ideas. Have soft Christmas music playing in the background. For your meal, why not make a pizza together with yours and his toppings, and lay out a blanket for your tablecloth? For this date night in, consider wearing your favorite pajamas and Christmas tee, and socks! Don't have the socks? Hit the Dollar Tree before date night! (We've included questions below!)

<u>Carols and Chips</u> – If you're not going caroling with others, carol with the two of you! Each pick five Christmas carols and have them ready on your playlist/Bluetooth speaker. Before each is played, say why you like that carol. Prepare chips/dips ahead of time. Mad Dash Mixes has so many cool and easy dip mixes, and stop by World Market for some interesting chips! While there, pick up a seasonal tin of Christmas cookies! When you're finished listening, put on a Christmas movie and snuggle in. For this date night in, pull out your favorite sweater/jeans/sneakers for a comfy night at home.

https://www.maddashmixes.com/

<u>Cozy Sips and Bites</u> – Dress up for this date! And head out in the car, dressed to the nines! Play your route for your cozy sips and bites. Peruse takeout menus and make three orders to be picked up curbside – a great appetizer, an entrée, and coffee/pastries to go. Between each

stop, pull over for snapshots (take your tripod) at pretty sites, so you can enjoy the pictures or print them out/post later.

Life with him can still be fun even if places are closed, and not as much is available to do. So make it happen, and share what you did! Merry Christmas!

After 40 Years – Togetherness – by Marcy Lytle

Some of us are now working at home and being together with our spouses for hours and hours a day, at night, on the weekends, and we quite enjoy it – BUT then there are those days when we want to scream and run away. Am I right? I think we've had a few of those, even though the joy of being together has far outweighed the annoyances. But here are a few examples, in case you can relate:

I'm about to make lunch and he decides to come to the counter to clean his coffee pot, and gets in my way. I just want him to sit down and wait until I'm finished.

We've prepared said lunch and we're sitting down to watch a show while we eat, and somehow I see every little thing he does, from licking his fingers to smacking his lips. I'm sure he's not doing anything different than before, but my ears and eyes are way too sensitive!

I'm looking at my phone, taking a break, and he is too, but we don't want the other one to know that we're not being "productive" and we don't want the evil eye for how we're spending our down time...

I retreat to the bedroom when he's in the front room, so that I can talk to my sister without him hearing and chiming in responses from the background.

He remarks on something in the house that's been there for years, as if it's new and different, and I sigh and roll my eyes.

Have I listed enough examples of this togetherness and all that it brings?

It's now been months of this, and we've found a few tricks to still being in love at night after all day together, all week together, and all that jazz!

- Communication is key. Talking about our expectations and irritations has helped both of
 us to see and be aware of time and space...and words and looks.
- Separating into different rooms isn't a bad thing. It can be good to pick corners and go there, for a few hours...then return together later in a better mood.
- Listening to each other work brings insight on the pressures of each person's work, and appreciation for each other grows.
- Realizing the need to get out of the house is so important, as he and I both walk, go through a drive-thru, sit near an open field or in a parking lot to eat and people watch.
- Sunshine and a breeze change the entire atmosphere of the home when we return after a brisk walk.
- Weekends with planned activities bring order, anticipation and fun to the week's end of work, work, and work...at home together.
- Hugs cannot be forgotten, and neither can the kisses, as they send our hearts soaring.

Hope your togetherness hasn't brought you pain, but rather much gain. I wonder what 2021 holds and what else we will learn?



Rooted in Love - The Greatest Gift – by Kaelin Scott

With the holidays quickly approaching, I find it hard not to get in the spirit. There's so much to be excited about! Stockings and presents and Santa, oh my!

I love listening to Christmas music while I work around the house, and I have to admit that I have an affinity for Hallmark movies too. I also love the gentle glow of the Christmas tree during the dark and quiet evenings....well, at least after the kids go to bed it gets quiet. It's so easy to get wrapped up in all the glitz and glam of the commercial side of Christmas. Especially when we have little kids whose eyes light up brighter than a thousand Christmas lights at just the mention of presents. And I don't think there's anything wrong with making it festive and fun! But we have to remember the real reason for the season, and we must make sure our children know the reason as well.

In case you don't know the true meaning of Christmas, here it is in a nutshell. God wanted to rescue His people from their sinful ways, and the only way to do that was through a perfect atoning sacrifice. That sacrifice was His Son, Jesus, who was born in a stable as a humble baby. When He grew up, He gave His life for us on the Cross, taking the punishment for our sins. And after three days, He rose again and ascended to His Father. This means that we can spend eternity with Him in heaven, as long as we give our hearts to Him. Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birth. If you want to learn more about it, check out the book of Luke in your Bible.

It's okay to get excited about presents and Santa and parties. Those are fun things at any age! But the most important gift we can give our children is the *gift of faith*. It's vitally important that we teach them about Jesus and how He gave us the gift of life. That's what Christmas is all about, and without that we would have no reason to celebrate. He is the reason for the season, and He should be the reason for our joy.

No Christmas tree or perfectly wrapped present can compare to the beauty of His ultimate gift.

Let's go out and enjoy those holiday festivities, but make sure they aren't our focus. Let's make Jesus a conversation point in our homes. Let's make traditions that involve the Christmas story. It could be getting the family together to make a nativity scene, or it could be as simple as reading about Jesus' birth in the Bible. Whatever it is, let's don't forget why we celebrate.

And finally, let's be joyful!
We've been given the greatest gift of all.

Simple Truths – Opposite Prayers – by Marcy Lytle

I recall when my son was small and playing soccer that he wanted to win every game. Of course, he did! We wanted his team to win, as well. And often, I caught him whispering prayers to win. But of course, there were many times the other team won. This was probably one of my son's first experiences with asking God and then not receiving what he prayed for.

Fast forward to just this year, when many Christians were praying for the election and for their candidate of choice to win the presidency. I'd say many were confident that their choice was the best choice, and so they prayed and prayed hard. I saw many say just that on social media. They were anxious all week as we awaited the election results, stating they were praying for our nation, for the "right" one to win.

But just like I told my son...the other team probably had boys on it that were praying the same prayer my son was praying. They wanted their team to win. But only one team was going to get the answer they wanted, and the other was going to lose.

It's hard to explain prayer to kids. The exercise of prayer starts with asking for Christmas gifts, for a friend to spend the night, and yes...for the winning score at a game. But I remember that my son looked like he understood that while he was praying one thing, another boy could be praying the opposite – and the sure fact was that one team would win!

It seems that opposite prayers, especially among Christians, tend to bring out the worst in us! We are sure that we've "heard from God" and what we are praying for is the best for all. But across the street is a friend that believes in the power of prayer as well, and she's praying the opposite prayer!

How can it be so often that Christians that love God and want the best are praying opposite prayers?

Could it be that we're praying the wrong words? Instead of praying for particular individual to be placed into office, perhaps we should be praying about the things that matter the most...loving others and loving God...and asking God for those things to take place no matter who gets voted into office.

Maybe our kids should be taught to pray for God's presence to be on the field among players, as they compete but honor, on the field and off.

Instead of praying for a win, or for our own choice, or for what we "know" to be best, we could just lift up His name and pray that His kingdom would come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Maybe, just maybe, if we learn to pray that way and teach our kids the same, there won't be signs in our yards with a candidate's name, but rather one that says something else. I have a friend that had a sign made in America's colors that said "Love God and Love Others." I think all that pray would agree on those two choices. But who is going to run our country on those

values? We had no idea, but only hopes in men with flaws; because we all had issues we deemed the most important ones to consider.

Who is going to win a soccer game? It might be the best team, or the one that makes the least mistakes, or there might be a tie. But if the prayers of the kids are made, asking their Father for all to have a good time while playing, there will be congratulatory wishes at the end of the game...no matter who wins.

I know that's not a popular sentiment. Parents yell on the fields and stir up anger at coaches, and get called off the field due to misconduct. I think some of us should be called off the field for a while too, to relearn what prayer really is. Because opposite prayers are taking place across the street in the homes of people we love.

We don't have all the answers. And we're not supposed to know what's best. I'm pretty sure that's why the Lord demonstrated the best kind of prayer to start with *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...* you know the rest.

We have a president, it seems. And it's time to pray for our leaders, all of us. One prayer for the hope of our nation.

Firmly Planted – Friend on 14th – by Dina Cavazos

"No friendship is an accident." O'Henry, Heart of the West

I've been single for a long time and am quite happy with it, but sometimes it can get a bit lonely, even for an introvert like me. It's not that I don't have friends—I do, and I love them, but one thing I haven't had for years is a "neighborhood friend."

I usually have a lot of projects going on and am invariably working on something, looking for something, planting, imagining, writing, or reading something! Moving furniture, getting a picture hung straight, unloading a heavy object—there are techniques that make these things easier, but sometimes I just need a hand. A like-minded friend within walking distance to talk things over with, get an opinion, or call for an impromptu adventure—this is something I was missing.

I'm not sure when I started praying seriously for a "neighbor friend"—maybe four years ago. It was a "heart's desire" kind of prayer. I live on the edge of the older part of town and love the big trees and unique homes. Sometimes while walking I would wonder who might live in a certain house. If a house was for sale, I'd imagine "that person" might be the new owner. There is one particular street that has always been a favorite because it's kind of a hidden gem—a little alcove with two great houses—a tiny quaint one made of cedar (pretty unique!), and, next to it, a two-story stone house that was a mystery to me. Was it new, was it old? Did anyone even live there? (I've since found out it was a custom-built "storybook" house.) The tiny one next to it was also a mystery. It had an interesting looking garden area on the side. What was in back? I so wanted to peek!

One day, I drove by and the quaint cedar house had a "For Sale" sign in front. The wondering began: Who will get that house...it's pretty small for a family...maybe a couple, but maybe a single person. I kept my eye on it to see what would happen, and, finally, the "For Sale" sign was gone. I'd drive by to see if there was any sign of who might live there. (I know...I sound like a stalker!) There was one car, and sometimes a pickup was also there. I concluded it must be a couple. Disappointing. On my irregular walks I'd often walk down the "hidden gem" street. I never saw anyone outside and I continued to wonder.

About two years went by...

Just a few months ago, I decided to venture out. I went down 14th (aka the "hidden gem") and a woman was in the front yard of the tiny cedar house. She was working at planting or watering—I don't remember which--I stopped and we talked. She had bought the house about two years ago—a single person! We hit it off right away and the rest is history, as they say—we both love gardening, thrift store shopping, and books. We both have a cat, and we both remember shopping at the original Whole Foods store on Lamar in Austin years and years ago. It's not often I run into someone like that!! We've become good friends and have already gone on a few adventures.

Because of our mutual love for plants and our ongoing work on our own gardens, we're always looking for ideas and have self-toured several local yards—one was even featured on Central

Texas Gardener. Our shared enthusiasm and these amazing and creative gardens have been inspirational.

It's easy to get in a rut and be so fixed on a plan that one fails to see other possibilities. I thought there was little room for anything else in my garden, but now I see new ways to add to the design and have more peace about the things I can't control (like leaves!) There is a lot more I can do. God not only answered my prayer for a neighborhood friend, he re-ignited the fire in my soul for what I'm meant to do...and *that* is above and beyond what I asked for.

Ephesians 3:20

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us...

Unearthly Thing - Through the Least of These – by Angela Dolbear

"What *is* that?" I asked, my heart pounding in fear as I gawked at a creature I could not identify, which appeared to be alive. And moving.

My husband, Tim, and I stood huddled over this mysterious organism in our backyard for a good ten minutes, mystified, on a sweltering Austin, Texas Sunday afternoon in late August.

Barely bigger than my thumb, hairless and pink, with no eyes, this tiny unidentifiable animal lay injured under a massive old oak tree in our backyard. Dark purple bruises lined one side of its body. Slowly, it pulled its tiny forearms (or legs?) up closer to its face.

In this new position, I could see that this little unknown beastie strongly resembled a squirrel. Eureka! It was a newborn squirrel with its umbilical cord still attached.

He (we could clearly biologically identify it as a "he") must have fallen out of the nest about twenty-five feet above us, which swayed precariously in the top branches of the oak tree. My heart began to break for this little one.

Being an extreme lover of all God's creatures, well, except snakes (it may be an "Eve" thing, but I'm not a fan), I knew there was only one thing to do. We had to try to rescue the poor little guy, and do everything in our power to try to nurse him back to health.

I couldn't bring myself to touch the weird hairless pink skin, so I did what any woman would do, I asked my husband to pick him up off the ground. Tim placed him in his make-shift shelter made out of an empty 12-pack Diet Coke box, furnished with soft cloths and leaves from the oak tree.

We brought him inside our home, and immediately jumped on the internet to research baby squirrels and how to best care for them. We spent the afternoon bookmarking websites and making lists of things we would need to get from the store for him.

We refrained from naming our tiny guest, both of us silently resolved to not get too attached to him, just in case he didn't survive his terrible fall.

Following the instructions we had studied online, we fed him a few drops of water from an eyedropper every few hours. The instructions also said to keep the baby warm, so we wrapped activated hand-warming packets in a wash cloth, and placed them in his box. And we prayed.

The next morning, hoping and praying he was still alive, I carefully peeked into the box I had kept next to my bed all night. Tiny arms wriggled and wrapped around my pinky finger. My heart melted instantly.

By now, I was completely comfortable with his soft smooth skin, so I picked him up and carried him close to my heart to the kitchen. I prepared his special meal of scalded whole milk with a little Vitamin D oil mixed in it, something I would do every day for the next two months. Just a couple drops of milk, and he was full. Every four hours. He appeared to grow stronger and a little more active by that evening.

The next day, he opened his little toothless mouth and hungrily suckled the eyedropper filled with his milk meal. We were slowly growing enamored with this tiny trooper. And we kept praying for him.

By the third day of eating like a champ, it seemed he was going to live, so we decided it was time to give this sweet baby squirrel a proper name. We held him up, gazing at his tiny face, dark orbs where eyes were forming under a layer of skin. A faint shadow of fine brown hair had begun to cover his body.

Our son Kyle proposed the name "Spartacus." A fine name we thought. Little did we know at the time, this warrior name foreshadowed the feisty survivor he would become as an adult squirrel. "Spartacus" seemed a little grand for such a tiny being, so we nicknamed him Sparky.

Sparky grew, and our love for him grew along with him. He was part of the family now. He accompanied us on various family functions and holiday celebrations. He journeyed in the back seat of our car tucked into one of his homes all the way to Dripping Springs, Texas, and even as far as Houston. He was one well-traveled squirrel.

We created a "public figure" Facebook page for <u>Sparky</u>, so our family and friends could enjoy watching him grow through pictures and videos we posted regularly -- sometimes daily. He has fans all over the world admiring his poses and antics. He was always a topic of conversation at our church. Friends asked us every Sunday how Sparky was doing, and we would joyfully reply, "Great! He's so nutty!"

Sparky's eyes finally opened when he was about a month old. Looking into his large inky brown, almond-shaped eyes was like meeting him for the first time. To say we loved him was an understatement.

Sparky would regularly spend his afternoons napping as he laid on the back of my neck under my hair, or curled up in the tiny front pocket of my T-shirt. We purchased several new homes for him to accommodate his growth and activity level. We started with a hamster "bubble," and gradually progressed to a five-foot-tall cage in which any ferret would feel at home.

One morning, as I opened his ferret cage to let him have breakfast on my desk while I wrote, I notice a dark line that ran down his abdomen. By the end of the day, his "man-berries" had dropped. He had nutted-up and hit puberty. And he was so feisty, way more than usual.

The next day, when I took him for his daily venture to the outside world, he climbed up the oak tree and ascended out of sight. But this time, he didn't return.

I was completely heartbroken. And worried sick. Could he survive in the outside world?

Tim and I had to trust God that He would take care of little Sparky. We prayed fervently for our little buddy. Two agonizing days later, he popped up in the lowest "Y" of the oak tree. He ran down my arm and burrowed himself into the front pocket of my hoodie sweatshirt where he would always find the raw shelled pecans I kept for him. It was as though he had never left. My heart soared! We praised God all day long.

Now we got to watch Sparky acclimate to the great outdoors. We watched him do things we know only his instincts inspired him to do. It was amazing. We marveled at how God created and encoded these little creatures for life in their environments.

Sparky figured out how to build the tightly-woven nests that tree squirrels constructed out of carefully chosen fresh branches. The squirrels bite off the branches, bring them to their nests, and then weave the branches together with their tiny hands. When the branches and leaves dry, they've created a sort of sealed upside-down basket, in the tallest of the tree tops.

Day after day, we watched Sparky eat some of the nuts we gave him, and then decide at some point to bury the others. It was such fun to watch him dig a hole, plant the nut, cover it over with dirt, and then pat it down several times. He was very thorough. Of course we never taught him to do this. How did he know how to bury nuts? It was amazing to watch his God-given instincts in action.

When I would sit out on our back porch reading my Bible, I would look up in the oak tree, and spot Sparky sprawled out on a tree branch closest to the porch roof. His limbs dangled down and his eyes were half-closed as he rested in the gentle swaying of the breeze. It reminded me that I should have that kind of trust in God. There is a time to build and a time to gather food, but there is also a time to rest--to rest in the shadow of the Almighty, as Psalm 91 says.

God taught us so many lessons through raising Sparky. We learned about trust, provision, and most of all, His immense encompassing and ever-present love.

One day, I was washing my hands at the kitchen sink, watching Sparky out in the yard burying the almonds I had just given him. I somewhat felt like I was watching my child at play. I was thinking about how much I deeply cared for and loved this little critter, how every morning I looked forward to him running down the tree toward me to get his breakfast. I just loved his very presence so much. I loved him as if he was my adopted bushy-tailed son.

Then I heard the unmistakable self-authenticating voice of God say in my spirit, "How much you love that little being is only a fraction of how much I love you." I froze. Those words permeated my heart and reverberated through my entire being like the echoes of a gong. They still do, even now as I write about them.

I needed to hear that. I needed to be reminded of God's great love for me. I was still grieving the loss of my beloved Golden Retriever Caleb, who had passed away four months previously at the young age of five. And we had been experiencing some financial hard times. Times were just rough and tough all over causing a great deal of wear and tear on my faith.

But God used Sparky to reach down through my despair to paint a clear picture of His unfailing and all-encompassing love for me. *For me, personally.* God's grace fell upon me full-force through my love for Sparky, my adorable tree-dwelling pal.

We saw Sparky just about every day for over a year, and every day I reflected on some aspect of how God loves me, and how He cared and provided for me. I saw how I need to just rest in Him daily, trusting Him fully like Sparky--with my limbs dangling down and my eyes half closed, just swaying in the breezes of life.

And most of all, I realized how God saw this newborn squirrel that needed to be saved. With all that is going on in the world and in the universe, God arranged for his rescue. He provided Sparky with a safe home and abundant love, just like how God saw that I needed saving and saved me through His Son's redemptive work on the Cross.

And He saw that I needed a timely reminder of His great love for me, which He provided through the very least of these-- a tiny Texas Fox Squirrel, named Sparky.

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series, and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, all available in paperback, Kindle and audiobook formats on Amazon. Angela writes real, relevant, relatable, and reverent fiction, with an aim toward spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ, while inspiring readers to laugh, cry, and crave certain genres of food. She loves reading, writing and leading worship music with her husband Tim at their church in Nashville, Tennessee. Please drop by and sing-up for news and free goodies at http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm. Blessings to you!

Moving Forward - I Surrender (Again) – by Pam Charro

32 years ago, I made one of the most challenging decisions of my life. After 5 months of studying the bible with a small group of friends, I gave my life over to Jesus. It was a complete 180 from the life I had been living, and, despite bumps and bruises along the way, was definitely one of the smartest things i've ever done.

I'm still re-surrendering today.

The pastor at my church asked a couple of weeks ago, "Are you ready for God to clear your schedule?" He didn't get much of a response, so he moved on with the sermon for a few minutes and then asked again, "So are you ready for God to clear your schedule?" Again, we didn't respond much, so he said, "I'm going to keep at this until you get it." I had to dig through layers of apathy, unbelief and disappointment before I realized that I had been withholding control of my life from the Lord. And the only way he is going to give me the life of my dreams is if I return that control back to him.

Like many of you, my current life doesn't look anything like I thought it would. I have fought hard through so much difficulty and so much of my reward doesn't seem to be in sight yet. Why is it still so hard, and when can I start to be a little bit comfortable?

Without answering that question, I felt God asking for my surrender. Because, despite my disillusionment, he is still God and he still has better for me than I can ask or imagine. Maybe comfort and predictability shouldn't be the goal; maybe what God has for those of us who have been made uncomfortable blows all of that out of the water. And God is a gentleman, so he won't force this amazing life on anyone. He only asks that I trust and believe. When I consider this, what alternative do I have? I can't control all that much, anyway, so I might as well decide to give it to him.

So I recommitted myself to spending the first 30 minutes of every day in silence with him, not even asking for anything, just being in still surrender to him. And I'm now more certain than ever that my very best life still lies in front of me, because I remembered who he is and have decided to believe him.

Father, whatever it is, have your way. My heart is yours. Take it all. My life is in your hands.

This is *gonna* be good.



FRESH THYME - Entertaining - by Marcy Lytle

I love to entertain, except I'm usually so tired afterwards. Entertaining, by one definition, means to give attention or consideration. So I suppose that's what we do when we have guests or family over. We give them attention by serving them food, keeping them happy and busy, and considering their needs and wants.

However, I'm not writing about entertaining friends. Did you know there's a verse in the bible about entertaining? It's Matthew 9:4. These guys brought Jesus a man that was paralyzed, and Jesus told the man to take heart, that his sins were forgiven. Some of the teachers that were listening nearby were thinking that Jesus was blaspheming God by saying that, and Jesus knew their thoughts. He then asked this question:

"Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?"

What funny choice of a word to use, right? He then stated that he indeed had the power to forgive sins, and to heal. He next spoke to the paralyzed man and told him that he was healed, and to get up and take his mat and go home.

Have you ever thought about how we all entertain thoughts in our hearts? It means we give consideration and attention to thoughts, thus causing them to take up residence inside of us, even when we know they're detrimental to our well-being – spiritually and physically. In this case, the teachers that were watching Jesus probably were expecting him to heal the man first. After all, that's why he was brought to Jesus in the first place. But Jesus spoke to the man's deepest need – that of needing forgiveness. Because of the teachers' preconceived notions about what was best, these thoughts that Jesus was blaspheming came to mind. To blaspheme means to speak irreverently about God.

Once they judged Jesus for not acting as they thought he should, these thoughts took up residence in their hearts, much like our guests take a seat when they're invited to the table. We then serve our guests and they go home full. But when we entertain judgmental thoughts and feed them with our invitation to sit there and fester, we're drumming up a whole lot of trouble.

If these teachers had quieted their minds, dismissed these thoughts that came to their hearts' door, and not allowed them in at the table inside, they would have then seen that Jesus cared for the man deeply as he healed him completely. When Jesus did heal the man, it says the people were filled with awe and praised God that Jesus had such authority as he did!

I think we all do this. Jesus is near, we have a need or present to him a need, and he waits and doesn't heal when we expect it to happen. We then judge him as being non-caring, unaware, and certainly not our provider...when we ask and don't receive. But we don't know that Jesus is at work performing another miracle of greater or equal value – that of speaking to the heart of the individual we are praying for – or to our own hearts! If we would just quiet our minds, send the unwanted thoughts away, we might be still and see that a lot of good will take place in His right order.

As stated above, we're exhausted and tired from all the effort it takes to entertain guests we have in our home, but it's so worth it because of the joy it brings to have them and to serve. But entertaining evil thoughts can not only be exhausting but deadly to our spirits. Had those teachers sent those evil thoughts away and entertained good thoughts that enabled them to watch and wait and see, they would have realized that Jesus was healing the whole man...not just the paralyzed limb.

Something worth thinking about today, isn't it? I know I am...

FRESH THYME - One Last Look – by Marcy Lytle

We all do it. We get dressed, we comb our hair, we make that cup of coffee, we look at our list of to-do's and then the last thing we do is go back to the mirror and check. We look to see that we didn't miss something, to see if our hair is still in place, if our zippers are up and our make-up is smooth. And then...we leave the house in confidence that we look okay and the day will go well.

I was thinking about that activity and realized that as 2020 ends and a new year begins, we need to do the same thing! We need to take one last look at this year and all the craziness that it ushered in, and decide what to do with it...before 2021 begins. We need to see if we missed any lessons, if our faith is still intact, if anything exposed is now forgiven and covered, and if our faces are set like flint for the future.

2020 brought in a disease, and our country reacted. People died, families were separated, friends fought over mask-wearing, and sanitizer became the new home commodity, even more important than bread!

2020 was an election year, and either our candidate won or lost. Emotions ran high among neighbors with signs in their yards for this one or that one, and drivers sneered as they observed the opposing team and possibly said something hateful.

2020 brought to light injustice, racism, and hatred – that is always there when people judge and are judged by skin color or status or wealth – and protests and violence erupted and brought new levels of fear in our neighborhoods.

2020 demonstrated record breaking storms, disasters, and craziness that we would not have believed had someone told us last December that it would be such a year.

So that's what we see in the mirror when we look at 2020. All of these broken things that need attention reflect in our vision, and we have to make a decision before we walk away from the 2020 mirror and step into 2021.

Just like we adjust what we see to be out of place on our physical bodies as we gaze one last time before heading out the door, we have to adjust things before we head into the door of this coming year.

The fight against the diseases is not over, and most likely new diseases will arise. We have to choose to place our lives in the hands of our Creator and ask Him for provision and health, and the ability to lie down and rest.

Our country is now being led by the newly elected President and whether we like it or not, we now need to pray for those leaders. More praying and less griping, that's the adjustment that needs to take place. Prayer is powerful, not just an "Oh well, I'll pray" with a sigh...

Hatred is always living in our streets and we have to overcome it with the kind of love that is patient, kind, keeps record of no wrongs, and the kind that is not boastful but lays down its life for a friend.

I'm pretty sure more storms will arise in the forecast, and in our lives, but we can look to see who it is that's with us in those storms, the One who rises above them all and invites us to the secret place beneath the shadow of His wings – wow – what a picture!

I'm always taking one last look in the mirror, often to see if my hair is sticking up somewhere! And many times, something needs to be adjusted. I know that my life, my heart, and my spirit need adjustments after the rocking of the boat in 2020.

So let's all take one last look and say with a big smile (not a pitiful sigh) "Welcome 2021." After all, it's a new year, another gift of time to get it right with Him, our neighbors, and those that see things differently than we do.

FRESH THYME - The Pause – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever started to buy someone a gift, whether it's a child or a friend, and stopped and paused and had a thought like:

They don't deserve this gift

They won't even appreciate what I'm doing

They never give me anything

They have enough, so why am I spending my money?

I bet we all have had similar thoughts that have causes to pause before we buy. Pausing before we buy is always good, when we're trying to be frugal and careful and wise. But pausing before we buy because we're trying to judge whether or not the recipient is worthy of the gift is not good! Worthiness isn't part of the equation in gift giving!

Most of the time, our kids won't thank us like we'd like them to, by gushing on and on about how perfect their gifts are. We have to let this go and give to them because they're our kids. Period.

None of us deserves gifts at one time or another. We've all been ungrateful, thrown tantrums, or been downright rude. So we can offer grace to those that don't seem to appreciate their blessings, and give anyway.

It's hard to give and then not expect. So hard. We give and we want something given back. It's the way we feel in marriage, and with our friends. But Christmas is a great time to pray about who to give to, to pray about what to give, and then to give without expectation of anything except the satisfaction that you obeyed and gave.

Maybe that friend has everything she needs and more, so why would you buy her another candle? I have a few friends that feel like because they have a lot, they are always expected to pay, give and dole out compassion...yet people don't give it to them because of their abundance. That makes for a sad heart. So give to that friend who has everything, because she will LOVE IT. Even if it's just a card or candle or a bar of scented soap!

Giving can be so complicated if we let it. And it can be a very sad experience if we only give to those we think deserve it, those that we think will give back, and those that will thank us over and over again.

It's hard. But my desire is to give this holiday season with joy, knowing that my heart is full and I want to give to bless. Because the truth is that He will bless me because I give, and that's the best blessing and gift to receive – more than anything else in the world.

The blessing of listening, obeying and then giving results in the satisfaction of relationship, happiness and joy this Christmas.

FRESH THYME - Traffic - by Marcy Lytle

It was late on a Monday afternoon and I sat at my desk facing the front window of my house, where the sun was starting to set. I felt drawn to be still and close my eyes for a few minutes and just listen. These are the things I heard:

- A dog bark
- Cars drive by
- The whirr of a motorcycle
- Ice dropping in the fridge
- A voice on the sidewalk

I kept my eyes closed and faced forward and could feel and sense the light, shining on my eyelids.

I thought about the other kind of "traffic" I'd heard earlier today:

- The health report for Texas
- New social media platforms that are growing
- Unrest with the election results
- Influencers and the latest must-haves
- My own voice of condemnation for eating too much lunch

Sometimes, we pull up in shady spot in a park and nap, but we are unable to do so if there's too much traffic nearby, like:

- Slamming doors
- Playing children
- People talking
- Trains or trucks
- Wind in the trees

What's my point in sharing all of this?

The only way the traffic doesn't disturb in all three of those examples is if something louder drowns it out. Uplifting music can be my choice to listen to, instead of listening to people and their opinions and statements. We turn on the AC so the noise of the blower drowns out the outside noises, when we're trying to rest. And when I was sitting at my desk, I wasn't really hearing anything except the traffic...until...

I heard his voice say:

COME – come to me when you're weary and I will give you rest. Lay your burdens at my feet, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Learn from me. Follow me. I am the Good Shepherd. You shall not want. Lie down in the green pastures, and drink from the cool water where I lead you to drink. Let my rod and staff comfort you as I steer you away from the cliff. Sit down. Eat.

In the presence of darkness, because I am the Light. Surely my goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life.

The traffic will settle down later tonight, less cars will be on the road, and I will lie down to sleep. And because I sat still and listened and heard a louder voice above the din, I'll sleep in sweet peace. Not the peace that's here today and gone tomorrow, but the peace that passes all understanding, because He keeps my mind quiet when I lay still and choose to listen...to His heart over me.

What's your traffic like? Close your eyes and listen...