CREATE 25 BOOKLETS WITH THESE EASY, SINGLE-PAGE TEMPLATES. SIMPLY FOLD, CUT AND DONE!

2015 THRIVING FAMILY ADVENT CALENDAR

TALES OF CHRISTMAS PAST

25 inspiring true stories of the season

COMPILED BY VANCE FRY
PAPER ILLUSTRATION BY GAIL ARMSTRONG / LINE ART BY DREW POCZA

Story Booklets
THANK YOU for downloading “Tales of Christmas Past,” the 2015 Thriving Family Advent calendar.

ABOUT THE POSTER
If you already have a poster, this download includes all the components you’ll need to use the Advent calendar.

If you’ve downloaded this and you don’t have an Advent poster, return to the download page.

Assemble your Advent calendar by placing the calendar dates behind the border graphics on the poster, as per the directions found on the following two pages.

ABOUT THE STORY BOOKLETS
For added fun, you can create a library with the 25 booklets (see Object Cutouts page).

WHAT TO DO
1. Starting on Dec. 1, read one story each day.

2. Encourage your children to listen carefully to determine which icon on the calendar matches something from the story. Once they find the correct picture, carefully remove that icon (or fold it out) to reveal the date.

3. After you read each story, your children can cut the matching picture from the Object Cutouts page and paste it onto the gray square on the front cover of each booklet.
Calendar Dates

These pages include the dates needed to assemble your interactive Advent calendar. You'll be making a frame of numbers hidden behind the frame of icons on the poster.

Cut along dashed lines.

Glue or tape Rectangle A to the tab of Rectangle B to make a long strip.

Line up the top edge of the long strip to the top back edge of the poster.

Glue the lower edge of the strip to the back of the poster.

Glue Rectangle C to Rectangle D to make a long strip.

Line up the bottom edge of the long strip to the bottom back edge of the poster.

Glue the top edge of the strip to the back of the poster.

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Connect with 19

Cut along dashed lines.
Glue Rectangle E to Rectangle F to make a long strip.
Line up the left side of the long strip to the left back side of the poster.
Glue the right edge of the strip to the back of the poster.

Connect with 24

Cut along dashed lines.
Glue Rectangle G to Rectangle H to make a long strip.
Line up the right side of the long strip to the right back side of the poster.
Glue the left edge of the strip to the back of the poster.

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**Booklet Directions:**

1. Fold in half lengthwise, print side facing outward.

2. Fold in half again.

3. Open the previous fold.

4. Fold left to center.

5. Fold right to center.

6. Open all folds.

7. Using a craft knife cut along the printed dotted line.

8. Fold in half lengthwise to replicate step 1.

9. Pull the two center folds away from the center and crease edges.

10. Wrap front and back covers around the other pages to create the booklet!

When looking from the top, it should look like this.
Creative ways to use your booklets

Share how you use your booklets on our Facebook page.

Facebook.com/ThrivingFamily

Object cutouts

Just for fun: When the day is completed, cut out the object for that day and paste it on the front of the booklet.

- Create ornaments by punching a hole in the corner and tying a string through it.

- Take turns reading a page.

- Hang them on the wall or fridge to create a booklet advent calendar.

- Write a note on the back and share the story with a friend.

- Remove a large bar of soap from its box. Cut out one of the long, narrow sides of the box. Wrap the remaining sides with wrapping paper. Slide these books into it. Use the mini holiday bookcase to hold your booklets.
Can you imagine spending Christmas Day floating around in space? In the years since the beginning of the space program, a few astronauts have had the opportunity to celebrate the holiday while in orbit around Earth. Christmas in space looks different than what might happen in your home. Astronauts may eat turkey for dinner, but it arrives in a plastic pouch, not on a platter with all the trimmings. And there's not much room for a tree, although in 1973, astronauts aboard Skylab 4 wired together some empty food cans to create a crude Christmas tree. Modern astronauts have been able to bring aboard a few simple decorations, including a fireproof fabric "tree" that attaches to a wall like a poster. But gifts are rarely exchanged. Everything on a spacecraft has to be tested to make sure it isn't too big, too heavy or doesn't have an odor or chemical makeup that would harm the astronaut's tiny, delicate living environment.

The first Christmas in space was during the 1968 Apollo 8 mission. This was a big moment for humans in space: For the first time, humans would fly over the surface of the moon. And for part of that orbit, the astronauts would transmit radio and video back to Earth. This special transmission would be heard by the largest audience ever to listen to a human voice.

"Do something appropriate," NASA told the three astronauts, Frank Borman, Jim Lovell and Bill Anders. They talked it over. It would be Christmas Eve, but they knew that reading from the Gospel of Luke wouldn't work. Not everyone on Earth listening would be celebrating Jesus' birth. But there was something that would translate to the world's different religions and cultures: the belief that God made our world. So as part of their broadcast, the astronauts read the account of the creation of the earth, as told in the first 10 verses of Genesis.

Astronaut James Irwin, who flew on the later 1971 Apollo 15 mission to the moon's surface, wrote about that unique perspective on our world:

"You can see the Earth like a beautiful, fragile gem hanging against the blackness of space. It's as if you could reach out and pick up our world. The moon is a new perspective on our world: you can see the Earth through the eyes of God."

ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras

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In 2013, a wildfire started in a dry field near the Black Forest area outside Colorado Springs, Colorado. Dry winds and record-setting heat stoked the flames, and within a few hours the fire raged out of control. Towering flames swept through neighborhoods and wooded countryside. Before the wildfire was contained, it burned more than 14,000 acres and destroyed 486 homes. The Black Forest Fire was the most destructive wildfire in Colorado’s history.

Ted Robertson’s home was one of those destroyed in the fire. When Ted returned to his family’s property after the fire, he was shocked to see how little of the home remained. The house had burned completely down to its foundation. The brick fireplace and metal water heater stood like lonely towers in a wasteland of ash and rubble. As he picked his way through the wreckage, Ted found the remains of his family’s possessions—blackened kitchenware, a twisted metal bed frame, a porcelain doll’s head dusted in ash.

But on this summer afternoon, Ted actually had Christmas on his mind. Years earlier, his wife, Teresa, had made a ceramic Nativity scene, complete with shepherd’s eyes, Peter, and Jesus, the Nativity scene had become a treasured part of their family Christmas celebrations, but in their rush to leave the house before the fire swept through their neighborhood, Ted and Teresa had been unable to take the Nativity set with them. And now Ted was searching through the rubble, hoping to recover some parts of their life that he thought were lost.

Ted believes that finding the Jesus figurine in the rubble was the first step in recovering from the pain of the fire. “We’ve gone from apprehension to hope,” Ted told a local news station. “We’re going to recover some parts of our life that we thought were lost.”

And isn’t that the real hope of Christmas? In the darkest of times, Jesus is always there. Jesus is always the Christmas in the darkest of times. And isn’t that the real hope of Christmas? In the darkest of times, Jesus is always there. Jesus is always the Christmas in the darkest of times.
Can you imagine a world without airplanes? That’s how it was on Dec. 17, 1903, as two brothers prepared to test their “Flyer” machine. Wilbur and Orville Wright had been experimenting with flight for years. In fact, their 1902 glider would later be recognized as the world’s first steerable flying machine. But it could only glide on air currents. On this cold, windy morning a week before Christmas, the brothers were focused on a higher goal: to fly a machine that could take off from the ground and power itself through the air. The two had built a lightweight engine that could transform their glider into a self-powered airplane—if they could just get the machine off the ground. On their first attempt, the engine had stalled and the machine had crashed before takeoff, breaking the wing.

But this time the engine worked. At 10:35 a.m., with five witnesses present, the aircraft took off from a track and stayed airborne for 12 seconds, flying a distance of 120 feet. The brothers performed three more tests that morning, taking turns piloting. Their last flight was 850 feet—longer than two football fields!

What did Orville and Wilbur do after their exciting first flights? They shared the good news, of course! This was long before the age of mobile phones, or even the widespread use of regular newspapers. So the brothers walked into town—Kitty Hawk, North Carolina—to send a telegram back to their family in Ohio. The message read to their family in Ohio. The message read:

“Inform press.”

You might think this would have been the front-page story of every newspaper in America. Humans had conquered flight! But most newspapers weren’t all that interested. While there were a few brief reports, the historic event was mostly a nonstory. One editor was reported to have looked at the telegram and remarked, “How nice. The Wright brothers will be home for Christmas.”

Why the disinterest? Most people at the time viewed human flight as the domain of dreamers and fiction writers. And other inventors had made similar claims of success before. Why get worked up about yet another claim of human flight? There was also a general lack of understanding of flight mechanics and the significance of the Wright brothers’ invention. Even the New York Times, the largest newspaper in America, did not cover the event.

Eventually, the Wright brothers did get the recognition they deserved. After several more public flights, the Wright brothers convinced the world of the truth of their Christmas flight: They were indeed the first to successfully fly a powered airplane.

Luke 2:8-11

As the news of the story spread, and the world began to see the potential of flight, the Wright brothers were hailed as heroes. They were celebrated for their daring achievement and the impact it would have on the world. The Wright brothers’ invention changed the course of history, opening up new possibilities for travel and communication. And while the first Christmas flight was a modest success, it laid the foundation for the aviation industry that we know today.
Life Is a Miracle

Day 4

“I just want one thing,” the woman whispered. “If I’m still alive at Christmas, can I go home?”

Dr. Joseph MacDougall looked sadly at the woman in the bed. He knew she shouldn’t leave the hospital, but he promised that she could go home. It probably didn’t matter. He didn’t think she’d still be alive at Christmas.

In December 1947, tuberculosis was killing 23-year-old Eleanor Munro. When her husband returned from World War II, he came home with an undetected case of TB. Having no immunity, Eleanor contracted the disease. It targeted the lower lobe of her right lung—an almost impossible place to reach for treatment.

After several failed procedures, her doctors tried a risky experiment: use pressurized air to force her diaphragm (the main breathing muscle) up against the hole in her lung. If the diaphragm could press up into that hole, it could work a bit like a large bandage, sealing the hole and allowing it to close. But when the operation nearly killed Eleanor, Dr. MacDougall was forced to tell her there was nothing else they could do for her.

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Day 5

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Is there anything better at Christmas than a warm, wriggling puppy? Except something was wrong with this one. As Reuben Stringfellow looked at his friend’s dog and her brood of puppies, he noticed that one of the pups had only two normal legs and one tiny stump of a third. It was clear the mother was rejecting this helpless puppy, knowing that the weakling wouldn’t be able to find a place to feed. Reuben pulled the little dog from under the mother,

thanked her, and wrapped her in his football jersey and brought her home to ask his mom if they could fix her. “No,” Jude Stringfellow responded. “But maybe we can help her.”

The puppy was nearly dead, but with warm milk and water, a comfortable bed and lots of love, Jude nursed her up over the weeks of Christmas. Not long after the holidays, Jude and her family officially adopted the puppy from the owner, naming her Faith.

But the puppy still couldn’t walk, only sort of push herself along the

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As a little girl, Lejla Allison had a life filled with love and laughter. But then came the reports: War was coming to Bosnia.

Lejla and her friends had never heard of war. What did it mean? They soon found out. Men went away to fight. Store shelves emptied. Rockets blasted buildings. Children were not always free to go outside and play. War became a very familiar word. It meant pain and poverty.

Lejla’s parents believed she still needed to go to school, even though it was a long walk and their daughter didn’t have the proper supplies. Her notebook had been filled several times already. Whenever she filled it, she would turn back to the beginning, erase the previous lessons and then begin writing lightly on the worn paper. Lejla’s shoes were even worse than her notebooks. Filled with ragged tears, they offered little protection against the winter snow. Her dad had tried to repair the shoes with wire, and her mother covered her feet with socks and plastic bags, but the cold always crept in, and Lejla arrived at school with numb feet.

Then came a day that would change Lejla’s life. It was a frigid morning in December, and Lejla pleaded with her mom not to make her walk to school. But her mom wrapped her feet again, telling her daughter that education was very important. As Lejla walked to school, she grew more and more angry. She hated reusing notebook paper and wearing shoes that were garbage. She hated war. She hated her whole miserable life.

As Lejla approached the school, she saw a group of children standing outside, holding colorful shoeboxes. She wondered why she needed a box. Then she saw a boy telling her that some foreigners known to give her shoes? And new notebooks? She went back to the man who had given her the box. “Who are these gifts from?” she asked. “These gifts are sent from Jesus,” the man replied. “He is the greatest gift.”

Lejla began to cry. Who could have had a box of gifts? And who could have known that Jesus had come on Christmas long ago to save the world from sin. That day at school, Lejla invited Jesus to be the Lord of her life.

Today, Lejla lives in the United States with her husband and two children. Her family’s favorite Christmas tradition? Filling shoeboxes with gifts and treats for needy children. Lejla knows firsthand that the love of Jesus—giving children the gift of Christmas—can you give this kind of love? Share the true meaning of Christmas with your children this year. Set a box on the floor, and let your kids help fill it with gifts. Why not take it to a school for needy children in your area? A beautiful pair of new shoes, a warm jacket, a blanket—these are the gifts that give joy to children in need. And as Lejla would say, “Go get one!”
As the busy holiday shopping season of 2012 was ramping up, New York City police officer Larry DePrimo was finishing his patrol in Times Square. He heard people giggling.

“Look at that guy!” someone said. “It’s the middle of winter, and he’s walking around barefoot!”

DePrimo looked over and noticed an elderly homeless man with no socks or shoes. He had large blisters on his feet. DePrimo could feel the bitter cold seeping through his own boots, even though he was wearing two layers of socks. He walked over to the man, bent over and asked him his name. “Don’t you have any shoes?” he asked.

“It’s OK, sir. I don’t need no shoes,” the man, Harry, replied. “But God bless you.”

DePrimo then asked the man what size shoe he wore. He found a nearby Sketchers store. “I’d like to buy a pair of boots, something that will last awhile,” DePrimo told a salesperson.

A few minutes later, he walked out of the store carrying a pair of all-weather boots, size 12. The manager of the shoe store, who was uninsured at the time, applied his own employee discount to give the cop a better deal on the pair of boots. DePrimo handed the boots and a pair of socks to the homeless man, who was surprised at the officer’s gift. “That’s mighty nice of that cop,” Harry later said. “Last time someone gave me new shoes, I think I was 10 years old.”

DePrimo was surprised by how his little act of kindness touched so many lives. People would often come up to him and say, “What you did inspired me to do a great thing for another person.”

DePrimo feels humbled by the experience. He keeps the receipt for the boots as a reminder that it’s worth it to do the right thing. “You see something like this, and you remember that people have it worse,” he told the New York Daily News.

The following Christmas, DePrimo was promoted from street cop to full detective, but he will not soon forget his experience with the homeless man. “Everyone around the station now calls me ‘Boots,’” he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile. "The story now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile.
A Shepherd's Cane?

Who made the first candy cane? Who thought to put stripes on it? Why does the modern version look like the letter “J” if you turn it upside down?

Despite being one of the most popular treats of the Christmas season, no one really knows who invented the modern candy cane. Still, there are some good stories. One fanciful tale depicts the efforts of a candy maker in the 1600s who was dismayed at a government ban on public displays of Christianity. To give local children a visual reminder of Jesus, he allegedly created the candy canes and the explanation that its shape, colors and other features represented different truths about Jesus. Another more widespread story tells of a German choirmaster, back in 1670, who was worried that children attending the Cologne Cathedral’s Nativity service would be unable to sit still. So the choirmaster asked a candy maker to craft white sugar sticks he could give to the children to keep them from fidgeting during the service. The choirmaster thought of shaping a hook on top of the candy sticks, like a shepherd’s staff, to help the children remember the shepherds who had come with their flocks to visit the baby Jesus. The choirmaster is also said to have taught the children that the white stick was a good reminder of how Jesus, our Good Shepherd, lived a perfect life.

So are the stories true? Probably not. The first written references to candy canes come from the 1800s, so those earlier dates are likely incorrect. But there does seem to be some evidence that candy canes were used as a sort of bonus feature: so that children and parents could hang them on a Christmas tree.

As for the hook—was it really meant to resemble a shepherd’s staff? Perhaps, although there isn’t any clear evidence. It’s possible that the hook was added years later as a sort of bonus feature: so that children and parents could hang them on a Christmas tree. Either way, we can still look at a candy cane and remember a shepherd who considered the truth that Jesus is our Good Shepherd, who visited the baby Jesus, and remember the shepherds who spread the good news of the baby Jesus’s birth.

While these stories probably aren’t historically accurate, we can still look at a candy cane and remember the shepherds who visited the baby Jesus. We can still look at a candy cane and remember a shepherd who considered the truth that Jesus is our Good Shepherd, who visited the baby Jesus, and remember the shepherds who spread the good news of the baby Jesus’s birth. While these stories probably aren’t historically accurate, we can still look at a candy cane and remember the shepherds who visited the baby Jesus. We can still look at a candy cane and remember a shepherd who considered the truth that Jesus is our Good Shepherd, who visited the baby Jesus, and remember the shepherds who spread the good news of the baby Jesus’s birth.
The Game-Day Train

As December 2004 wound down, there was plenty of bad news mixed in with the warm and fuzzy stories of Christmas cheer and hope for the new year. For Bennett and Vivian Levin, the stories that struck them most were of wounded soldiers coming home from war. The couple wondered how they could help. They recognized that the wealth they’d been blessed with couldn’t bring back a soldier’s leg or restore sight to a veteran blinded by shrapnel. But maybe they could still do something that would show love and support to these brave men. Something with . . . their trains.

Yes, some people own their own trains, and the Levins had quite a collection. In addition to two locomotives, the couple owned three historic railway cars, which had been restored with luxurious wood paneling, comfortable seating and gourmet dining facilities. As might be expected from a couple who owned their own trains, the Levins had a love for the history of railroads in America, and they wanted to restore an old tradition.

Many years ago, trains carried important guests to the famous Army vs. Navy football game in Pennsylvania. The tradition came to an end in 1975, when the Pennsylvania Railroad company went out of business. Bennett and Vivian thought that the best way to revive the ceremonial trip would be giving wounded veterans this VIP treatment.

“We wanted to give them a first-class experience,” Bennett told the Philadelphia Daily News. “Gourmet meals on board, private transportation from the train to the stadium, perfect seats—real hero treatment.”

Instead of giving the seat to another Marine.

As the pieces of the project came together, the Levins established some rules. No media would be allowed. Politicians and even senior military officials were likewise not invited. The Levins wanted to avoid publicity, allowing their passengers to truly enjoy the train ride, with no pressure to pose for cameras, respond to reporters’ questions or adhere to military protocols.

On a cold day in December 2005, after months of planning, the Army-Navy Game Train was ready to ride once more. This time it featured steam locomotives and 18 vintage railway cars. It also had a new name: the Liberty Limited.

The project was a huge success, and the Liberty Limited made its first trip in subsequent years.

After that first trip, things were way better. The pieces of the project came together: the train, the passengers, the food, the furniture. The Levins were thrilled. As they left, Vivian noticed that the seat be given to another Marine.
When most children ask their parents about their birth, they hear stories of growing tummies and months of waiting—painting baby rooms, visiting doctors and nurses, and enduring the long hours of labor. And then the joy of new life, a precious baby to hold and love.

Sharon Elliot was 57 years old when she first learned the story of how she really arrived in her family.

“I want to tell you the truth,” her dying mother, Faith, said. And then she began to tell an extraordinary story:

On Christmas Eve of 1931, a couple named Edwin and Julia Stewart were driving across the Arizona desert on their way back to the Phoenix area after celebrating Christmas with family. As they crossed the cold, barren terrain, their car broke down. Ed grumbled a little and got out to take a look. Julia walked away from the car to stretch her legs.

She was about 150 feet from the car when she heard a sound that she couldn’t identify. Was it an animal? When the wind calmed for a moment, she heard the sound again. Was that actually a baby crying? Julia called for her husband to come help look. They found a cardboard hatbox on the ground. Edwin nudged the box, and a muffled wail rose into the desert air. He took the lid off, and inside the box was a tiny, red-haired baby girl wearing flower-print pajamas.

They were both horrified at the discovery because it seemed to mean that a mother had abandoned her baby in the middle of the desert! The baby was cold and weak, and as soon as Ed had gotten the car running again, they rushed her to the first police station they could find in Mesa, Arizona. The police chief took the baby to a nearby maternity home, and after a few weeks, a judge ruled that the baby would be put up for adoption. Several couples applied to adopt the little girl, but because of nasty weather conditions, the judge already had a pool of applicants. The judge then addressed the baby’s mother and asked her if she wanted to claim the baby. The mother shrugged and said that she didn’t want to claim the baby. The judge then asked her if she would be willing to sign the adoption papers. The mother hesitated but eventually said yes. She signed the papers, and the baby was adopted.

Today, Sharon is 84 and still doesn’t have many answers. She told CBS News that she’s OK with that. “It’s so long ago—it doesn’t matter to me,” she says. “I had a nice family. I grew up happy.” And that, perhaps, is the only answer to this mystery that really matters: On a cold Christmas Eve long ago—a lost child was found and brought inside to the warmth and love of a family.

Sharon’s story is one that has been retold for years. Newspapers, books, and movies have all told the story of the “Hatbox Baby.” The story has been passed down through generations, and it continues to inspire and awe people around the world.

Today, Sharon is a grandmother to a nearby maternity home, and she enjoys spending time with her family. She still doesn’t have many answers, but she knows that her birth mother must be somewhere out there, wondering about her daughter.

And that, perhaps, is the only answer to this mystery that really matters: On a cold Christmas Eve long ago—a lost child was found and brought inside to the warmth and love of a family.
The Great Christmas Rescue

“Captain, the enemy has started attacking Hungnam.”

Capt. Leonard LaRue looked out from the bridge of his cargo ship, the S.S. Meredith Victory, anchored off the port city of Hungnam, Korea. In the distance, he could see fiery explosions followed by towering billows of smoke. The da-boom of nearby cannon fire rattled the hull of his ship. He wasn’t a military officer, but he knew that the tide of this war had turned.

Communist troops from North Korea and China had over-whelmed U.S. forces and their allies, forcing them to withdraw to the south. As enemy forces closed in, Korean civilians fled their homes, hoping to escape death or capture. Thousands of refugees gathered at the docks, desperate to get aboard any ship that was leaving. More than 190 ships were aiding the evacuation, but there were more people than military ships could carry. A radio request had come in, asking if any cargo ships could help in the rescue.

“As the crew unloaded their cargo and a few scraps of food, and meant to provide for nothing that could provide for the needs of all the refugees. They bombarded the city. U.S. battleships provided cover, but they didn’t have much time. As night fell on Dec. 22, Capt. LaRue ordered, “Maybe we can get the rest of these people to safety.”

The following afternoon, the ship began chugging away from the harbor. After navigating through minefields and avoiding detection by enemy aircraft, the ship arrived at Koje Island late on Christmas Day. There the crew unloaded the refugees. Despite the journey through the wet cold, the cramped quarters and the shortage of food and water, not a single life had been lost during the two-day voyage. Crew members actually unloaded more people than they’d loaded on: Five babies had been born on the trip.

“Let’s get to a dock and start unloading the cargo,” Capt. LaRue ordered. “Maybe we can get the rest of these people to safety.”

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, it was the greatest rescue in human history.

When the war was over and his ship decommissioned, LaRue joined the Benedictine Order of monks. In one of his writings, the former sea captain said, “I think often of that voyage. . . how such a small vessel was able to hold a crew of two, a captain and a cook, and hundreds of people. . . It was a remarkable experience.”

LaRue died in December. He left a legacy of compassion and courage.

Isaiah 25:4

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A Second Chance

Shortly into her marriage, Mary Kay Beard discovered a surprising fact about her husband: He was an expert safecracker. He taught Mary everything he knew, and their marriage soon turned into a bank-robbing partnership. When her husband abandoned her a few years later, Mary continued her crime spree by herself, using her shooting and safecracking skills to rob more than a dozen banks. It all came to a screeching halt in 1972 when she was caught by the FBI and sent to prison.

Locked in her cell with nothing to do, Mary began to read the Bible. She remembered the faith that her mother had tried to instill in her long ago. Mary recommitted her life to Jesus, praying that God might give her a second chance to turn her life around.

Mary spent six Christmases in prison. Every Christmas, Mary saw church groups bring the inmates simple gifts of shampoo, toothpaste and soap. During her first year, Mary was puzzled by how her fellow prisoners treated these simple toiletries. They organized the items, dividing them into little piles. Anyone take two shampoo bottles for a tube of toothpaste?" they'd call out. Then the women would wrap each set in pieces of newspaper or scraps of fabric.

Mary soon understood. During the annual visitation day with their children, these women gave the small packages as Christmas gifts. The children would rip open each package and give their mothers a big hug. "Thank you so much, Momma," the kids would say. Mary watched as each child's face brightened with joy. The gift itself didn't seem to matter. What mattered was that it came from their mother.

After her release from prison, Mary Kay worked at Prison Fellowship—a ministry to inmates. One of her first tasks was to start a Christmas program. She remembered the toiletries that prisoners gave their children. She knew there were many children who would be separated from a parent during the holiday. Mary wondered, What if we could help prisoners give presents to their children?

Mary and her team of volunteers visited prisoners to invite them to sign up. They called the caregivers and put children's names on paper ornaments shaped like little angels. Within a few days, all 100 ornaments had been taken from the "Angel Tree." So Mary visited more prisons, called more caregivers and put up more angels. That year 556 children received gifts from their parents in prison. Mary soon understood: During the Christmas season, giving creates a bond between churches and families who have loved ones in prison. What's more, those gifts that participate in the Angel Tree program. What's more, those gifts have received gifts from churches around the world since that first year, more than 9 million children.

Mary says the credit all goes to Jesus. "I had no idea God could use me in any way. My life but God is not limited by my past. He can make anything new," she says. After the mess I had made of my life, I had no idea God could use me to change the lives of others.

For the love of Jesus with those who are lost, Mary created the opportunity to encourage shoppers to buy presents for the children in the Angel Tree program. What's more, those gifts have built many bridges between churches and families who have loved ones in prison. What's more, those gifts have received gifts from churches around the world since that first year, more than 9 million children.
Honesty Is Infectious

DAY 13

If there were any guy on the streets of Manchester, England, who could have used a special Christmas blessing that year, it was Alan Dent. He’d spent the last five years without a home, sleeping every night at a temporary city shelter. He earned a little money by setting up a chair on a downtown street corner and playing songs on his recorder. People walking by would put a few coins in the metal can sitting beside him, perhaps even stopping for a few moments to listen. At the end of the day, Alan would take his can full of coins to the bank around the corner to deposit them or exchange them for paper money. It allowed him to buy a hot evening meal and a few basic supplies, but it was hardly a comfortable living.

“I’ve just not had the best luck,” the 69-year-old told the Manchester Evening News.

Then one cold afternoon shortly before Christmas, Alan noticed that someone had left a purse on the pavement near his coin can. It felt full. Was it a gift? A little extra Christmas generosity to a man down on his luck?

Probably not. Alan looked inside and found keys, tissues and a driver’s license—along with a bank card and what looked like a good amount of cash. The bank card was for the same bank where he took his coins, so he gathered up his things and brought the purse to the branch around the corner.

“I believe this belongs to one of your customers,” he told the teller.

But Alan Dent’s larger reward may be knowing that his moment of honesty apparently became contagious. The Manchester Evening News reported that over the Christmas holiday and into the new year, police noticed a large increase in the amount of lost property being turned in to the city center. Police and TV reporters dubbed this phenomenon the “Alan Dent effect,” noting that Alan’s famous act of kindness had likely inspired many in the city to follow his example. If there is an effect, it’s that honesty is infectious. It seems to be spreading.

It was all true. Sandy Sharples, a mother and insurance salesperson, was overjoyed to get the call from the bank that her lost purse had been turned in, with the money—about $100—still inside. And she was surprised to hear that the person who turned it in was the homeless man who spent his days on a nearby street corner.

“It has all moved me incredibly. A person who clearly needs money hands in money,” said Sandy, who later gave Alan a reward for turning in the purse. “This lovely, kind gentleman has made me believe in the Christmas spirit all over again.”

When little Lauren Gross came into the world, there wasn’t much hope for her future. She was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), and doctors said she wouldn’t survive more than two or three years. But the doctors were wrong. Lauren grew up in a loving home and began to do many of the same things that other kids do: She rode a bus to school, supported sports teams and joined school choir. At home, she enjoyed reading, listening to music and playing video games.

Lauren doesn’t do all these things the same way you or I might do them. Because of her SMA, Lauren is quadriplegic. She lives most of her life in a high-tech wheelchair. She needs the help of a ventilator to breathe and a nurse to help with the tasks of everyday life.

But while Lauren’s body is weak, her mind is healthy. She communicates and participates in school by using a special computer that she controls with her eyes. The computer has a camera that tracks where her eyes move. To type messages, she moves her eyes from one word or letter to another, blinking to make her selections. Her eyes are very fast! This computer even gives Lauren a way to play musical instruments and control her video game system.

In 2014, Lauren was a senior in high school, and she had the same hopes and dreams as many of her classmates: to go to college and see more of the world. She also wanted to go to church more often and maybe attend a Chicago Bulls basketball game someday. But transportation was a problem. She had to drive for special needs vehicle insurance and several tanks of gas. A week before Christmas, Lauren and her father picked up the van from the dealership. Her first trip? Her dad drove her around the parts of town known for their elaborate Christmas light displays.

David said that he was emotionally elated to see Lauren in the driver’s seat of her new, accessible van. “It wasn’t the first time the idea had come up, but Lauren was determined to make it happen.”

Matthew 25:40
In the winter of 1989, Romania still suffered under communist rule. At night, lampposts stood like dead tree trunks on the roads and walkways. Indoors, one could only partially escape the dark cold of winter. Oppressive regulations approved by dictator Nicolae Ceausescu kept lights dim and concrete apartment buildings cold. Food was also scarce. Communist officials sold the best produce and meat to other countries in order to pay for their extravagant lifestyles, while Romanian citizens were given food tickets for a weekly supply of thin soup, spoiled vegetables and bread laced with sawdust.

But in the darkness of oppression, a light was growing. Pastor Laszlo Tokes led a church in the western city of Timisoara. His powerful preaching about the love of God filled his church every Sunday. When he began to speak out against the communists' abuses of different people groups, the government tried to intimidate him, stationing armed soldiers around his church to try to scare away churchgoers. Government-hired thugs broke into his home and attacked him and his wife. But the Romanians wouldn't back down. Within days, the people of Romania, along with many former communists, rose up to remove the brutal dictator Ceausescu. They sung songs, linked arms and resisted the attempts of police to break through to the church. Word spread, and more people arrived in the courtyard around the church. A college student named Daniel Gavra took a package of candles out of his coat pocket and began to light them, passing them to other protestors who were brave enough to go through the crowds. The protestors knew the next day's action would be their chance for real change. They gathered again in the city square to begin a full-scale demonstration against the dictator. When night came, a college student named Daniel Gavra took a package of 1,000 candles, the student who'd lit the first candle, lost one of his legs while Romanian citizens were given food tickets for a weekly supply of thin soup, spoiled vegetables and bread laced with sawdust.

Matthew 5:13-16

Let Your Light Shine

Day 15

In the darkness of oppression, a light was growing. Pastor Laszlo Tokes led a church in the western city of Timisoara. His powerful preaching about the love of God filled his church every Sunday. When he began to speak out against the communists' abuses of different people groups, the government tried to intimidate him, stationing armed soldiers around his church to try to scare away churchgoers. Government-hired thugs broke into his home and attacked him and his wife. But the Romanians wouldn't back down. Within days, the people of Romania, along with many former communists, rose up to remove the brutal dictator Ceausescu from power. And for the first time in 40 years, Romanians celebrated Christmas in freedom.
One evening during December of 1879, a newspaper reporter walked briskly along the streets of Baltimore. It was a cold night, but the Christmas shopping season was in full swing. Shoppers bustled along the sidewalks, carrying bags and packages wrapped in brown paper. Store windows were aglow with beautiful displays of toys, gifts and colorful decorations. This man had little interest in the holiday’s festivities—and he certainly didn’t believe the season had any true significance. *A Savior born in Bethlehem? Bah, humbug!*

As the reporter passed a storefront, he overheard some children talking excitedly about the display. Something was unusual about this group, so he stopped to hear what they were saying. Two little girls were telling their sister about all of the wonderful items presented in the window. Toys, oversized candy canes, bright Christmas decorations. This girl was blind—presumably since birth—and her sisters were having a difficult time describing what they saw. "I may talk about Him and my position in trying to tell other people about Jesus; and yet they see no beauty in Him. I may talk about Him, and yet they see no beauty in Him."

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The newspaperman was so moved by the sermon—especially the part with the story about the three sisters—that he stayed after the service to speak with the preacher. "I was there!" the reporter told Mr. Moody. "I wrote that story. It's all true!"

As the room emptied, the two began to talk. The reporter confessed to the minister that he had never understood the appeal of Jesus, but that he now wanted to experience the grace and beauty that Mr. Moody spoke of. "I want to see for myself."

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2 Corinthians 4:6

*He will open their eyes and reveal Himself to them in all His loveliness and grace.*
As darkness fell on Dec. 24, 1914, an eerie silence fell along a long stretch of the Western Front—the main fighting zone in France during World War I. No gunfire. No artillery. No rockets. Soldiers looked cautiously over the tops of trenches. Would there really be no fighting tonight?

As dawn broke, a song came drifting across the frozen battlefield. The British troops looking over the edge of their trench would have sung with different words, but the tune was familiar: Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht. Alles schläft; einsam wacht. (Silent night, holy night. All is calm; alone and awake.)

German soldiers tentatively stood up from the opposite trench, holding their helmets high or waving small Christmas trees. "Merry Christmas!" some called across the field. "We no shoot, you no shoot. Agree?"

A day of peace? For Christmas?

Battle-weary soldiers from both sides looked at each other in surprise, and then climbed out of their trenches and into the scarred battlefield. The British troops were building and each side's leaders were hoping for a truce to last long—in some sectors, some even held burial services to say goodbye to friends who had been killed. The informal truce spread across much of the Western Front, which wound across 400 miles of the French countryside. The truce wound across 400 miles of the mud of the Western Front, which was often seen as a symbolic moment of peace and humanity amid one of the most violent events of human history. The Christmas truce is seen as a symbolic moment of peace and humanity amid one of the most violent events of human history.
Letters From China

DAY 18

Lottie Moon couldn’t understand why her cousin Sarah wanted to get on a boat and go to another country. “Are your parents making you go?” she asked incredulously. “Why wouldn’t ya’ll want to stay here?” She pointed toward her family’s vast plantation. It was a lovely afternoon. A gentle breeze cooled the porch where the two girls sat. “Isn’t this just the most beautiful place in the world?”

Sarah nodded. “I’m going to miss Virginia,” she said. “But Dad taught us that Christians should take the Gospel to those who haven’t heard it. He wants us to go to Jerusalem and help Jewish people understand that Jesus is the Messiah. And I really want to go, too.”

Lottie fought back tears. “Why would you go all that way just to share some old fairy tales?”

Sarah sighed. “I wish you still recognized God’s love, Lottie. But please, let’s write. I want to know everything that’s going on here.”

“Yes!” Lottie promised. “I’ll write every week!”

Lottie did write her cousin, but she continued to reject the truth about God. But in college, Lottie attended a church missions meeting that changed her mind. Lottie told her friends she would go to the meeting for a bit of fun, but she walked away knowing that she needed Jesus to lead her life and that she wanted to help others know Him. Lottie worked as a teacher for several years, but she was eventually accepted by a missions organization to go to China. She would work as a teacher in a very foreign culture, and she would live in very poor conditions. She worked with children, teaching them at home about Jesus, and she worked with Chinese citizens, teaching them at home about Jesus, and she worked with Chinese citizens, teaching them at home about Jesus.

The legacy of those letters continues to this day. Every December, the week before Christmas, Southwestern Baptist churches take up a special offering for missionaries. These donations covered the cost of missions, and they also provided the funds for overseas missionaries to give toward the needs of missionaries and the needs of overseas missionaries. These donations helped the church to give toward the needs of missionaries and the needs of overseas missionaries, and they also provided the funds for overseas missionaries to give toward the needs of missionaries and the needs of overseas missionaries.

Churches hold fundraising dinners. Children earn money through bake sales or birdhouses they’ve built during the year. These donations covered the cost of overseas missions, and they also provided the funds for overseas missionaries to give toward the needs of missionaries and the needs of overseas missionaries.

Lottie was an amazing woman, and very successful in her work as a missionary. She worked hard to support the work of overseas missionaries, and she worked hard to support the work of overseas missionaries. She worked hard to support the work of overseas missionaries, and she worked hard to support the work of overseas missionaries.
If you really think about some Christmas traditions, they seem kind of strange. For example, why do we chop down perfectly good evergreen trees and prop them up in our living rooms every Christmas? And yet can you imagine Christmas without a Christmas tree?

The custom has its roots in ancient times, long before Jesus arrived in Bethlehem. Evergreen trees and branches had been used to decorate homes during different winter celebrations for thousands of years. The evergreen branches reminded people that winter would not last forever. The sunshine and green trees of spring were coming soon. While many of these celebrations were pagan in nature, the central message of hope—that the bleak cold of winter would someday end—was probably why Christians began adapting the custom, to remind them that God rescues us from the dark and gives us eternal life with Him.

Many early Christmas trees were not really evergreen trees at all. Across northern Europe, people put small cherry or hawthorn trees into pots and brought them inside in the hopes that they would flower at Christmastime. There were even early artificial trees, although they looked quite different from the modern plastic tree. Those who couldn’t afford a real tree made pyramids of wood and decorated them with paper, apples, and candles.

The first documented use of an evergreen tree at Christmas and New Year’s celebrations was probably in the town square of Riga, Latvia, in 1510. Not much is known about the tree or the ceremony, except that it was attended by men in black hats and that after the ceremony, they burned the tree! There is evidence that this tradition continued into subsequent years, with celebrations of singing and dancing around a large tree that was, as the night and year ended, set on fire.

Sixteenth-century German preacher Martin Luther may have added his own contribution to the tradition of the Christmas tree. As Luther was walking through the woods one night before Christmas, he looked up to see the stars shining through the branches. He was so struck by the tree’s beauty that he went home and told his children it reminded him of Jesus, who left the stars of heaven to come to Earth at Christmas. Some historians have suggested that this contributed to the idea of adding candles to the branches of the Christmas tree. In many parts of Europe, candles are still used. The custom of decorating Christmas trees with lights was also influenced by the communal tradition of singing Christmas carols around a lighted tree. Many people, of course, now prefer to use electric lights instead of real candles.

Whatever Christmas trees you come across this season, take a moment to appreciate their beauty. Especially the warm glow of the lights. And may they remind you that the dark of winter does not last forever. Indeed, a real light has come into the world, a light for all people of course, now. The tradition of the Christmas tree is as old as Christianity itself. It has come into the world, a light for all people. Of course, now it is even easier to see the stars. The first documented use of an evergreen tree at Christmas and New Year’s celebrations was probably in the town square of Riga, Latvia, in 1510. Not much is known about the tree. But the stars of heaven were still shining, reminding people that the dark of winter was not forever. Indeed, a real light has come into the world, a light for all people. Of course, now it is even easier to see the stars.
It was early in the afternoon on Christmas Eve when Mike Hermanstorfer’s 30-minute nightmare began.

He was at his wife’s hospital bed, trembling with fear. Tracy wasn’t responding. Mike took her hand in his. Her arm didn’t move. Her skin was cold.

“Tracy, can you hear me?” Mike said. No response. The EKG machine told the only tale that really mattered at the moment: His wife’s heart had stopped beating.

Hospital workers quickly sounded a “Code Blue” alert—resuscitation needed for a cardiac event. They had to act fast: Tracy was in the hospital to give birth; now she and her baby were dangerously close to death.

Dr. Stephanie Martin was in a nearby room when she heard the alert from the delivery area. She sprinted to the room where Mike bent over the bed of what he believed was his dead wife.

“I couldn’t allow this father to lose both his wife and child, especially on Christmas Eve,” Dr. Martin later said.

Doctors attempted to resuscitate Tracy with chest compressions and a breathing tube. But after four minutes, she remained unresponsive. Knowing that the risk for brain damage for the baby would increase very soon, the staff performed an emergency Caesarean section.

Coltyn Hermanstorfer was born limp and silent. Doctors detected a faint pulse, however, and immediately began trying to resuscitate the little boy. As they worked, Mike held Coltyn, not knowing whether his son and his wife would live or die.

But then Tracy took a small, weak breath, her first in several minutes. The EKG machine began to show a pulse. It was a tiny, barely perceptible blip on the screen, but it was real. Doctors rushed her to a separate operating room to finish the surgery and put her on a ventilator.

Hospital staff continued working on baby Coltyn. In a few minutes, his skin became a healthy pink color. Then, suddenly, his lungs began to move. Mike held Coltyn, not knowing whether his son would really live, doctors reported more good news. Tracy was in stable condition, breathing on her own.

Doctors attempted to resuscitate the little boy as they worked, never giving up hope. Knowing whether his son and his wife would live or die mattered. Mike held Coltyn, not knowing whether his son and his wife would live or die.

Deuteronomy 10:21, Exodus 15:26

Life Is a Gift
The Final Christmas of the USS New York

Isaiah 2:4

The USS New York—for years the finest battleship in the U.S. fleet—arrived in New York Harbor in December of 1945. It was part of a mighty fleet of 41 warships—"the greatest concentration of naval might ever seen in New York Harbor," according to one newspaper.

Can you imagine being there for that display of strength? But this wasn’t a mission of war. The Axis powers of World War II had surrendered unconditionally earlier that year, and many of these ships had been put to work bringing American soldiers home. This year marked the first peacetime Christmas in five years. A time for a real celebration. The Department of the Navy had ordered all ships back to harbor to allow sailors to have a Christmas break.

But crew members aboard a few of the ships had an important mission to attend to first: hosting a special Christmas celebration for 1,000 children from poor families. The mighty New York was one of those ships. She had been hosting these Christmas celebrations for the past 30 years whenever she wasn’t called to

Day 21

The tradition began. The crew, including those from other ships and surrounding businesses, donated money for food and gifts—dolls for the little girls and sailor’s outfits for the boys. The captain gave a donation.

The party was a tremendous success and the captain said afterward that nothing warmed his heart more than seeing all those children on board his ship, eating a big dinner, opening gifts and enjoying the company of his sailors. The Navy wrote to the ship’s crew, applauding them for their generous Christmas spirit. And so the tradition began.

Preparations got underway. Sailors and local businesses donated money for food and gifts—dollies for the little girls and nutritious platters of food for the boys. Wood and cardboard boxes were given a special tour of the ship, and those children on board this trip found other gifts as well. The children were given a special tour of the ship, and they went home with not only the gifts of food, candies and other presents but also the memories of a very unique Christmas celebration.

The following year, the New York was taken out of service. She was used for bombing tests and target practice. The old battleship did not go down easily. On her final mission, she was sunk by accident. She was renamed by many as the site where Santa Claus was born. She was the New York.

The year 1915 was a special one for this mighty battleship. It was the year the ship was decommissioned, and the crew was finally able to spend Christmas on the ship. The captain was responsible for the safety of all those children who had been invited to board the ship. He ensured that they had a safe and joyful Christmas. The tradition was continued the following years, and the ship remained a symbol of Christmas spirit for many years to come.
Layaway Angels

For Marilyn Garcia, Christmas of 2014 was going to be sparse. She’d been working two jobs, and it was still difficult making ends meet. She was about to move into a smaller home, which would help with the bills, but it meant that she wouldn’t have a Christmas tree this year.

She didn’t mind not having a tree, but she wanted to give her granddaughter one special Christmas gift this year. Marilyn thought that if she could put aside a little money from each paycheck, she could afford the Hello Kitty toy car that her granddaughter had her heart set on. Marilyn put a deposit on the car at her local Wal-Mart, and she agreed to make the layaway payments over the weeks before Christmas. If she could pay off the balance by late December, she could take the toy home and have it wrapped in time to surprise her granddaughter on Christmas.

But as the layaway deadline approached, Marilyn knew she wasn’t going to be able to afford the remaining balance on the gift. She called the Wal-Mart customer service counter and asked if she could have an extension for paying off her granddaughter’s gift. She was surprised to hear the employee tell her that no extension was needed. “The balance has been paid,” the worker said. “Earlier today, an anonymous man came in and paid off all layaway accounts. Merry Christmas! You can come pick up the car whenever you like.”

Marilyn was shocked by the news, but she wasn’t the only one to have this surprising conversation with customer service. The weaker economy had inspired many stores to bring back their layaway programs to help lower-income families purchase gifts for their children. An anonymous group of “layaway angels” had visited many of these stores to pay off those gifts. In 2013, two Massachusetts Toys “R” Us stores reported receiving approximately $20,000 each in donations to pay off layaway accounts. The balances of many layaway accounts that included kids’ items such as toys, bikes, and electronics were paid off.

Matthew 6:2-4; Proverbs 19:17

Christmas gift this year. Marilyn thought that if she could put aside a little money from each paycheck, she could afford the Hello Kitty toy car that her granddaughter had her heart set on. Marilyn put a deposit on the car at her local Wal-Mart, and she agreed to make the layaway payments over the weeks before Christmas. If she could pay off the balance by late December, she could take the toy home and have it wrapped in time to surprise her granddaughter on Christmas.

But as the layaway deadline approached, Marilyn knew she
Have You Found Jesus?

"Good news," the police officer said over the phone. "We have found Jesus."

When workers at the community center in Wellington, Florida, heard the report, they weren't thinking that the officers at the local police department had all simultaneously accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. No, the news meant that police had found their baby Jesus—the small figurine that had been stolen a few days earlier from the Nativity scene set up outside the building.

The missing Jesus at the Wellington community center wasn't the first such case. Every year, news reports from around the country tell of a small but unfortunate truth about the modern American Christmas: Some people get a kick out of stealing parts of the Nativity displays set up outside of homes and churches. More often than not, baby Jesus is the target—possibly because it's easier for the thief to cart off the Jesus figure than the shepherd or one of the wise men's camels. But these thieves probably understand what message they are sending by removing the most important figure from the scene. Sometimes, people send the most important figure from the scene out the door, too.

"If you want Jesus in your life, you don't have to steal Him," recently had their Jesus figure stolen, gave future would-be Jesus thieves a few words of wisdom. "The real gift of Christmas is that a global positioning system (GPS) tracker be installed inside the stolen property.

How did Wellington police find the community center's baby Jesus? Since this wasn't the first time the figurine had been stolen, police officers recommended a global positioning system (GPS) tracker be installed in a recent Nativity scene. BrickHouse Security, a surveillance company based in New York, has donated hundreds of these monitoring devices to various churches, retirement homes and other organizations. When unexpected movement of a Nativity piece occurs, Brickhouse's computer systems send text notifications to alert staff members to the theft. Police can then follow the satellite tracking information through a computer or mobile phone to find the stolen Jesus.
A Song Is Born

“Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht…”
The young Austrian priest, Father Joseph Mohr, had written the lines of this poem a couple years before, but now, on the morning of Christmas Eve, he couldn’t stop thinking of them. Especially that first line—it echoed through his mind. He thought, Perhaps this poem could be part of the Christmas Eve service this evening. And perhaps there could also be a modern twist, maybe something with his favorite instrument, the guitar.

Of course, if this poem were to become music, he needed a musician’s help. Joseph hoped that his friend, Franz Gruber, the schoolteacher in a nearby village and a gifted musician, could help him put a melody to his words. After a 20-minute walk on that brisk December morning, Joseph knocked on Franz’s door. “Franz, do you remember that poem I wrote a few years ago?” Joseph said. “I know it’s very late to ask, but might you help me develop a melody? I want to perform it tonight at the Christmas Eve service.”

Franz liked a challenge. He took the lyrics from the priest and set to work on it. Soon after, Franz called out, “Father, how does this sound?” and he began to sing the words to his new melody.

That night, December 24, 1818, the song filled St. Nicholas Church. Joseph sang tenor, Franz bass, and the church choir joined the refrain of each verse. The song, “Silent Night,” would go on to become the most popular Christmas carol of all time.

The song was performed again on Christmas Day, but it might have stayed there in Oberndorf, Austria, if it had not been for a happy accident: The following year, the pipe organ at St. Nicholas Church broke down.

An organ builder named Karl Mauracher came to repair the giant instrument. No one knows how he came across the song, but he left Oberndorf with a copy and passed it along to a few families of traveling singers. The Swiss composer Ferdinand Hiller arranged the song for pianoforte and published it. The music soon spread through Europe, and in 1839, the Rainer familyingers sang “Stille Nacht” for Emperor Francis I of Austria. The song continued to spread throughout Europe and in 1839, the Rainer familyingers sang “Stille Nacht” for Emperor Francis I of Austria and again for Czar Alexander I of Russia. In 1834, the Strasser family sang it for King Frederick William IV of Prussia. Frederick William enjoyed the song so much that he required it to be sung by his church’s choir every Christmas. The song continued to spread, and in 1839, the Rainers brought the song to America. Since then, it has been translated into more than 300 languages.

The song is simple, peaceful, and brings a little peace to this busy holiday season. Perhaps this Christmas, take a moment to enjoy the simple beauty of “Silent Night.”

Isaiah 9:6-7

24

remains one of the most beloved Christmas carols; perhaps because of its simple, pure focus on the heart of the holiday: Christ the Savior is born!
So many presents! So many parties! So much shopping! Can’t we focus on the real meaning of the season?

We hear such sentiments every Christmas, but the message isn’t new. In fact, nearly 800 years ago—in the year 1223—an Italian friar named Francis of Assisi was saddened by all the presents and parties that seemed to distract people from remembering the reason for Christmas. So Francis asked himself: How can we get people to focus on Jesus this Christmas?

While talking with a friend, Francis came up with an idea. He could put on a simple play that recreated the birth of Jesus. “I want to do something that will recall the memory of that child who was born in Bethlehem,” Francis said to his friend. “To see with bodily eyes the inconveniences of His infancy, how He lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by.”

To Francis’ knowledge, such a thing hadn’t been done in his church before, so he packed up a horse and traveled to Rome to present his idea to the leaders of the church. The leaders agreed with Francis’ reasoning for the play, and they gave him permission to proceed. Francis returned home to look for a location for the play. Outside of town, he found a large cave. He measured the space, picturing the scene in his mind: a simple manger with animals, hay and a few other details to capture the authentic feel of that long-ago night. With his plan in place, Francis then invited his fellow friars and all the townspeople to a very special Christmas Eve service. It was a great success; one writer described the excitement of the day: “The people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights and sonorous psalms of praise.”

When the people arrived at the manger scene, Francis began to teach about the birth of Jesus. The villagers listened solemnly while the Nativity play Francis had prepared reminded them of the reality of that night long ago. They could see it with their own eyes, hear it in their heart, and realize the true value of the Christmas season.

Luke 2:4-7

How humble indeed was the birth of the King of kings! How humble indeed was the birth of the King of kings! How humble indeed was the birth of the King of kings! How humble indeed was the birth of the King of kings!
Ask your boy to finish this sentence: Practice makes _____.

Survival skill No. 1: Respect

The most of his middle school career:

His can keep your

When he feels disrespected or embarrassed, he cringes, gets defensive and

Another way to build your daughter's confidence is to help

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