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TIPS

The Dressing - The Something List - by Marcy Lytle

I realize that I like a lot of somethings in my closet. I enjoy warm yet cute styles, I love accessories, my feet have to feel good and look good, and scarves are a staple for sure. It's that time of year when the weather might start to get frightful (I hope!) and having a closet with something that fits all the categories is so fun. Enjoy the hunt...

Something Corduroy

This cute jumpsuit is from Christy's of Salado, where I found it on clearance. However, there are so many jumpsuits available everywhere, and if you can find one in a soft corduroy, go for it. I've loved this suit so much, and the fact that it just buttons makes it easy to pull up and down! It can also be dressed up or down, depending on the shirt under or the scarf over.

Something Warm

I found this coat and scarf on vacation. Yes, it was hard to fit in my suitcase and bring home, but I love it. I love the neutral grayish hue, and I love the blues and grays in the knit scarf. The coat is super warm, so I hope you find one you love to keep you warm this winter season ahead...

Something Dressy

This long shirt dress was on clearance at Madewell last year after Christmas, so I've been excited to wear it this year. I wore it over a fall blouse, and jeans, and it really dressed up the outfit. It's a satin material and a rich navy color, both of which give a festive feel this season.

Something Comfy

This thick sweater coat was a find at one of the stores in the mall...I can't recall which...maybe Lucky Brand! It's THE BEST for wearing out and about on cold days, or for snuggling up with a good book to read by the fire. And I think it's rather cute, as well. Looking forward to wearing this on repeat.

Something Cozy

Look at these shoes! They're Sherpa lined, and they're from Walmart. I think I paid \$15 for them and I wear them a lot! They look cute with jeans, and they're great for wearing to the movies or out shopping, or wherever you go and need to keep your feet warm and feeling good.

Something Plaid

This scarf was on sale at Old Navy half-off when I bought it. And I have worn it and worn it so much, this fall. And I expect to wear it a lot this winter BECAUSE it's so big and so soft, and the colors go with a lot. You'll notice I wore it with the jumpsuit above, too!

Something Gold

Nothing dresses up an outfit like a gold sparkle – and this purse is mine! I found it at a festival and you can find one too – so many choices – from Marshalls to Amazon. Add it to any outfit, put on your heels and enjoy the season?

One thing this season to remind you is that the clearance aisle or rack can be your friend, for sure! I stop there first, before browsing the rest of the store. And if you're not shopping back in the stores still, visit them. Visit stores you might never have visited before – enjoy the hunt for the *some things* to add to your closet this December!

Seven for You – Fill the Stockings – by the Panel

I love filling the stockings, and our family has a special time to open them all...Christmas night. It's fun to find things, and sometimes it's hard, but stockings are a favorite part of the Christmas experience. We asked our panel of women to weigh in with their faves...for ideas for us all!

Christmas stockings when I was a kid in the UK held walnuts, an orange (that always fell to the bottom) chocolate coins, a toy soldier or a tiny plastic doll, and a sugar mouse. The items were few and simple and this is the way I wish stockings were filled today.

There is so much pressure to "gift" and to give more and more. The meaning of Christmas is lost in the big box store gifts, the high-dollar toys and boxes of candy. I miss the old days when He was first and the gifts were tokens of love.

Last year, my daughter, Alex, could not come for Christmas. She sent me the book in the image. It was the best gift I've ever had from her. We all want to be known when we leave this world. Known not just as a "Mom" or "Dad" but as a human being.

I've started writing in it...it asks to share our family history, our likes, our dislikes, our values and wisdom. Alex can have it forever and I get to leave part of me behind for her to keep.

Alex is in the UK now, and she'll get some chocolate coins and a sugar mouse from me. – Cathy

When my children were born, I made each of them a stocking to go with the two I had made for my husband and me. We still use those same stockings. After my kids got married and started to have children, I added a pin with the initial of each new addition. And I still "stuff" their stockings for them and include little surprises for their family members. Although, I put some of the stuffings in a bag along with what's inside their stockings. With all the grandchildren there's too much to put in just the stocking.

Each year I have regular items I include like toothbrushes. I also include Bath and Body Works shower gels and lotions for each family. Then I make sure they each have a couple of personalized items or candy depending on what they like.

For me, every year, my husband gets me a box of chocolate covered cherries. It's just not Christmas without these! And I worked hard for him to get into this habit when we were first married. He also thinks of special little things for me. One of my favorites is my puzzle books. He has gotten them in different sizes at different years but always with religious themes. He says he goes shopping for this and it always amazes me what he comes up with. - Carole

There are a few things I fill in the adult stockings each year. One is handmade luxurious bars of soap from markets in Christmas/Winter scents for the guys. I enjoy placing a pretty pen in each stocking, as well as cozy socks. I love to shop the markets for unique artisan earrings or other items, too. For the kids, there are cute "tiny" toys that appear in the stores (like a tiny Uno game, or a tiny violin, etc.) and the kids love the freeze-dried candies that are also at the markets. So I guess I realized, while writing this, that I love visiting the fall/winter markets to find

stocking fillers! I also love the little bins up at the front of Michaels – always cute stuff there. – like tiny office supplies and cute pens, and all sorts of small and unique items. – Marcy

We have store bought stockings that I had embroidered with our names on them.

Stocking stuffers:

1. Gift cards: QT, Amazon, Happy Panini
2. Candy, gum
3. Technology gadgets: chargers, usb connectors, thumb drives, magnetic chargers
4. Chapstick, Travel lotions, razor blades
5. Knick Knacks from Cracker Barrel

- Laura

A few years ago I decided to decorate burlap stockings and personalize them with the initial of each family member. I then arranged them on the wall beside my Christmas tree. On Christmas Eve I would fill them with inexpensive goodies and leave them on the hearth. This was fun for some but others of my family didn't seem so impressed. Plus, the stuffing and handling of these stockings proved to be detrimental to some of the embellishments. These stockings were clearly best used for decorating only.

As time has passed my family has grown considerably. My wall decoration is a work in progress. So, this year I plan to buy small stockings and fill them with a few goodies like a tiny baby doll and a few bite sized candy pieces. I will pass them out and let my family take them home. My wall decorations and my budget will remain intact. – Gina

My mother is in her 90s. Christmas with my family in 2024 looks so different than it did in her 1930's childhood and even in my childhood. Christmas for us is an ever evolving celebration. We first and foremost want to celebrate the birth of Christ and what his life means to us every day of the year. We want to celebrate each other and the joy of family. The adults in our family don't do stockings. The six (soon to be seven children) do have stockings. The items in there are fun and small and often consumable. I do enjoy going to craft shows before Christmas to see what new & imaginative toys and things the creative people have come up with. And I do often pray that the Lord would help me find a meaningful gift for the grandkids. I'm not looking for the wow factor. Just a little something special. - Shelley

Growing up in the 1960s, the youngest of five kids, my mom (er, I mean, Santa Claus!) would hang Christmas stockings. They weren't elaborate, but they were coveted; a box of 10 rolls of Lifesavers® (remember those?); peanuts, almonds and filberts; fresh orange; a box of Whitman Sampler Chocolates; and a few special individualized items. So I started at a young age loving the tradition of receiving a Christmas stocking.

Throughout my young adult life, I was the official *stocking provider/filler* when we all gathered at my parents' house for Christmas in Northern California. I became very creative in my thinking as to what each family member would get in their stocking – and I had anywhere from 10-to-20 stockings to fill each year. And from babies to my 75-yr-old dad!

Fast forward a few decades, and now it's just me and my husband. Our life is simple, we are winding down – and downsizing in retirement. We don't need/buy big, expensive, elaborate gifts. Well, truth is; our budget won't allow. Between yearly insurance due in December, and buying for kids & grandkids, our available funds for exchanging gifts is nil. But ...that's where

the fun comes in! Our gift to one another is a Christmas stocking filled to the brim. And boy do I have fun shopping for and putting it together.

So what's in the stocking? *Both fun and functional items.* I start buying items in early November. Things Dennis would like or need:

- Package of pencils (once a teacher – always a teacher!)
- Pens, crossword puzzle book, charger cord
- Box of Band-Aids®, dental floss, socks
- Favorite candy bars, beef jerky, cashews
- Gift card to favorite fast food restaurant
- and many more items that I find throughout the holiday season.

Note: *I confess; Dennis isn't as good as me at finding stocking stuffers. So I shop for my stocking as well (wink, wink). The secret is to buy your items in October and November, toss them in a bag – and don't look at them again – so you'll be pleasantly surprised when you open your stocking on Christmas morning! Hand the bag to your husband days before Christmas Eve and let him stuff your stocking. And chances are, he's found a few things as well to put in your stocking.*

Cousin Moms – Let’s Talk Coffee – by Kamrin and Charissa

It seems that all moms, all people everywhere, at least almost all...love coffee. We asked our moms of littles this month to share their favorite brews, why they love coffee, how they brew and set up at home, and on the go. It’s a treat that can’t be beat, right? Here’s what they have to say:

Charissa

For many years, I did not like coffee. I always enjoyed the smell but couldn’t stand the taste of it. I quickly grew to love it when I entered adulthood, got married and started my first full-time job.

I started coffee with about 75% creamer and 25% coffee. My husband was completely opposite - 100% coffee, no sugar and no creamer. Over the years, he has rubbed off on me and I have lessened my amount of creamer.

I’ve gotten to the point in my life where I need that morning cup! My days are busy and the warmth of a good cup of coffee starts my day off right. With that said, I prefer my coffee hot - even during the summer months. I can’t do the cold coffee; it just doesn’t work for me.

My husband and I are not coffee connoisseurs, and don’t do anything fancy. We prefer the carafe coffee over the single cups, as we can make a large pot and enjoy a couple of cups together. We have a Kitchen Aide coffee maker and it works well for us! It has a separate area for water that can be removed, taken to the sink and put back on. Simple and functional!

We are not picky when it comes to the type of coffee we buy - we like to try new ones! Our favorite coffee is from Black Riffle Coffee Co. They have great flavors, we can buy it locally, and part of the proceeds goes to benefit veterans - it is also owned by veterans. With my husband being a veteran, we love their mission! We buy already ground coffee, because as parents on-the-go in the morning it’s a lot easier to already be made.

My favorite creamer is Planet Oat - Oatmilk Creamer. It is easier on my stomach and still rich with amazing flavors - sweet & creamy, hazelnut, French vanilla, caramel, coffee cake and tons more! I also like to put a dash of stevia to add extra sweetness.

We are always on-the-go, so when we have to jet out the door in the morning, we use our Yeti coffee mugs. It keeps the coffee warm for a long time! They are a little pricey but if taken care of, they last a long time and totally worth the money spent.

Kamrin

Coffee is my love language. It’s kind of a big thing in our house, as I have always loved coffee, even before I had kids. For me, coffee has always represented slowing down, taking a moment to breathe, and also building relationships. My husband and I had coffee dates when dating, we played games at the coffee shop, and studied. Now, I love meeting friends for coffee, and I love having coffee time with God. It reminds me build relationship and community. My husband will sometimes bring home coffee as a surprise! I have a cup of coffee in my hand always.

Being a busy mom of three that aren't so little any more, they are involved in so many things, and coffee has become my morning routine. What I specifically love has changed over the years, one reason is our budget, because coffee is expensive. I also want to know what's in my coffee, and what I'm drinking. And I think my taste has changed, and I love making coffee at home.

At home, my favorite coffee is Stone Stash Coffee https://i.refs.cc/GrNcjNSB?smile_ref=eyJzbWlsZV9zb3VyY2UiOiJzbWlsZV91aSlslInNtaWxlX21lZGI1bSI6IiIsInNtaWxlX2NhbnBhaWduljoicmVmZXJyYWxfchJvZ3JhbSIsInNtaWxlX2N1c3RvbWVyX2lkjoxNTY3MTE2NzcxQ%3D%3D – a local roaster in my area – and they deliver to my doorstep. I love grinding the whole bean myself. They also ship in the state of Texas. But I love that it's air-roasted. Sometimes coffee beans have a burnt taste, but air-roasted doesn't have that taste. And the creamer I use is almond creamer. We love the Silk Almond Creamer. If I have to purchase at a store, it's HEB Texas Pecan <https://www.heb.com/product-detail/583162> coffee. It smells amazing and is the perfect blend! My husband loves cold brew and he makes it at night, and loves Café Bustelo <https://amzn.to/4eeyJ61> or the Texas Pecan the next morning. <https://amzn.to/48C1kB0>

If we do go out, we love Dutch Brothers or Starbucks and we grab that, and I do use almond milk there. But the sugar content bothers me, as I don't use sugar, just creamer. We also really love Summer Moon and Lamppost Coffee. I also love hazelnut or caramel latte, or even lavender honey. And autumn spice in the winter season is so good!

At home, I am just like my dad – I love coffee mugs! Each one is a reminder of a vacation or a memory. I have one from L.A. with my girl friends. I have one from a beach trip, I have a hippos mug (mascot of my city!). I have scripture mugs, too.

My set up is very basic, it's not a fancy coffee bar. I have a coffee machine that is auto-brew in the morning, and I love that aroma in the morning! I used to have a Keurig but went back to a coffee pot! <https://amzn.to/4egvQla>

Contigo is my travel mug, my to-go mug, and I've had it for 10 years! They stay hot and they lock, it doesn't spill. This is a must for moms of young kids! <https://amzn.to/3Ciyv0E>

In the Kitchen – The Holiday Season – by Marcy Lytle

The kitchen might be the most frequented room in the house during the holiday season, because the fridge is full of leftovers, there are things simmering on the stove, a plate of goodies might be covered and waiting to be uncovered, and drinks and snacks and smells abound. Here are some fun things to have in your kitchen this December:

Something simmering

I love a potpourri pot, and adding just the right mix this season is so fun and inviting for all. Here's my favorite mix for Christmas. Just add water to your pot and all of these ingredients, bring to boil, then turn down and simmer. Be sure to watch it and fill with water or turn off the burner, if you leave the house. This mix smells amazing: 5 bay leaves, lemon slices, 1 T whole cloves and 2 cinnamon sticks – bring water to a boil – then simmer and enjoy. Another option: orange slices, cinnamon sticks, dash of nutmeg, 1 T whole cloves, handful of fresh cranberries.

Snacks for grabbing

Trader Joe's has the best holiday snacks – just visit your local one and shop! I recently found a holiday mix bag at Cracker Barrel, great for having out in a bowl for those that pass by. And Texas Caviar Dip is a good one and oh so colorful – to have in the fridge for snacking – with tortilla chips. Did you know there are flavored cashews at Target? Try the dill pickle one or the cinnamon sugar, too! Set bowls on the counter and change them often, and make the bowl pretty! A great snack is those cashews with dark chocolate, or with apples and caramel sauce.

Candles Burning

This is a no-brainer, burning Christmas scented candles. But even if you don't like to burn them, you can use a warming lamp instead, or a diffuser, or just something scented in your favorites. I love peppermint, or vanilla, or cloves, or orange! And have plenty of lighters for lighting. I shared a pack of little ones over on the Tried and True page.

Calendar hanging

Print out or hang a calendar on the fridge, with the squares filled in, for family viewing. This way, when the kids come hungry, they can see what's coming up. Make sure you have driving to look at lights, a Christmas event or concert, a chili night at home, game night, friends over, gift exchange, all the things to fill your family with fun this month.

Tea towels hanging

World Market has the prettiest tea towels for holidays. Make sure you have at least one special towel that hangs on the stove and it's not for use, but just for looks. Why? Because it's Christmas, silly!

Coffee brewing

I'm not a coffee lover, but I love the smell. Maybe purchase some new Christmas mugs and have them sitting by the coffee pot with a cute stirrer. Include some paper to-go cups too, and you can find these at Marshalls in holiday hues and pretties. Make your coffee area pretty and inviting for those that brew. Or...if you like cider, enjoy that instead!

Sounds playing

I love having music on while I cook, while we're in the kitchen or anywhere nearby. Make a Christmas playlist, or just make sure you've got the tunes playing each morning and evening when meals are being prepared. It sets the tone for the day and the evening, when all go to bed. And play those Christmas songs – be sure to include some vintage ones, too!

Lights and Color

Hang a wreath, add some lights, clip on some Dollar Store poinsettias, but do something to make your kitchen cheery and bright. Get some of those cool twinkle lights that have a timer so that you can set them to come on around 5pm and stay on until bedtime. If red/green aren't your thing, there are so many other options for Christmas including teal and pink, if that suits your fancy! Whatever color makes you happy, add that in your kitchen and make the lights a focal point, so all who enter feel like dancing...

SUGAR + Spice - Winter Nail Colors – by Angela Dolbear

Nail polish is one of my favorite cosmetics. Even a simple home manicure helps me feel more complete and put-together and brings joy to my hands.

Painting your nails at home or visiting your favorite nail salon is a chance for rest and relaxation. For me, it's a lesson in patience to be still until those nails dry!

I recently picked up some beautiful new nail colors at Orly's "Polish Party," where each bottle was half-price (search Facebook for the Polish Party code, I used "FIVEONIT"). I'm not much of a trend follower, but here are a few hues that are on trend for Winter 2024.

[Orly Breathable 1-Step Manicure in Moonchild](#) – A bright white gold that lasts for over a week.

[Orly Lacquer in Retrograde](#) – A deep green/teal shift and shimmer. It reminds me of vintage Christmas ornaments.

The Orly reds for the holidays include sparkly [Star Spangled](#), bright [Cherry Bomb](#), and the deep red [Vermillion](#).

I love a deep, rich color for winter, so I picked up [OPI's Black Cherry Chutney](#) (Ulta, \$11.99). It's a dark burgundy with a hint of shimmer. So lovely (I'm wearing it now!).

Since waiting for my nails to completely dry is hard, I tried [Dry Drops from Olive and June](#) (Target \$9.99). A few drops of this oil set my polish and cut the drying time in half!

The beauty of blessings to you!

Angela Dolbear, Beauty Editor, is the author of contemporary spiritual novels, such as [THE GARDEN KEY](#) Series and [THE TORMENTOR'S TALE](#), as well as many short stories, which are available in paperback, Kindle, and audiobook formats on [Amazon](#). She loves writing and recording songs with her husband, Tim, at their studio in Nashville, TN. Listen to her new album, [STORMS](#) on your favorite music streaming service. She is also a self-proclaimed beauty junkie and has been since long before her mother allowed her to start wearing makeup at the age of 14. Please connect with her at www.AngelaDolbear.com

Tried and True – Last Month’s Learning – by Marcy Lytle

Wow, life has been full, and learning has been much! The more we look around and observe and live in the moment, I think the more we soak in and marvel at, and learn! So here is my list for the past few weeks and the things I want to share with you this month of December:

Soup bowls with a little side dip for crackers are just the best. Put on your Christmas list, or buy for yourself for the winter ahead.

My DIL lent me this book to read after two huge losses in our family. It’s a good one. For you, or a friend. It’s called Dark Clouds Deep Mercy.

Did you know that a group of sea otters is called a raft? How awesome! We just learned that on a boat where we got to see lots of these fascinating creatures!

My friend’s daughter has a website called www.hummingbirdandthebeagle.com and she makes the most beautiful gemstone chains for your yard or window...to reflect the light. You need this.

Ever heard of Humphry Slocombe ice cream? I had not, but saw it at a market – the Christmas version – and it was delish. Apparently, it’s sold at Whole Foods!

While visiting SF we found this bakery that makes animal shaped sourdough bread – and we bought the small turtles for the kids! They ship! And it’s delish. Boudin SF.

Did you know there’s a bocce ball restaurant? It’s called Camp de Bocce and it’s in Los Gatos, CA and it’s great fun – with the most delicious food – in case you’re ever out that way!

There’s the cutest desk calendar you might want to order for yourself now...to have for January. It’s from 1canoe2 and it’s beautiful and you can pick your theme. I love mine! Little cards sit in a wooden base, and it’s great to have as décor and to look at the days at a glance.

If you roast chickpeas and flavor them, they’ll stay crisp if you leave your jar cracked, when you store them!

I have these small lighters that I love, because they can be left in drawers all over the house, for candle lighting. They’re from Amazon!

Ever had Penzey’s spices? Oh my, there are SO MANY and they’re all so good. Toss out the old expired ones and include some of these, this coming new year.

If you need a roasted poblano, I heard about and tried roasting one on the open flame on my stove, and it worked! After it blackened, the skin was easy to scrape off!

I really like the crispy chicken salad (with honey mustard) from DQ – did you know they have this? It’s good!

Still decorating? Make old-fashioned paper chains and hang them to fill a window! The kids can make these for you!

There are the cutest leather card holders for tiny earrings and it comes in a set of seven, and they're the best!

Sally Hansen Tinseltown set of two glitter nail polishes – the best for the holidays – they are sold at JC Penneys!



HOME

I Don't Do Teens – Offer Hugs – by Marcy Lytle

We seem to hug little kids a lot because they ask for them, crawl up in our laps and long for them, and the kiddos are little and easy to hold! But what about the teens in our families and circles of friends? The older kids may not ask for hugs, or even bristle up when we offer them, but teens need to be embraced.

We have a teen in our family now, and he plays football and other sports. This past season wasn't a winning one for him at all. And while coaches and parents encouraged these boys game after game with affirming words and high-fives, they were still disappointed in all the losses. Especially when the score was so close...or so awful...and it was a shut out!

We all have teens in our circles:

If we're an aunt or an uncle, we can show up at birthday parties and offer a hug to this kid that's trying to act grownup, and we can offering a sweet praise in their ears when we hug like, "I'm so proud of you."

If we're a parent, we can pause and grab our son or daughter by the arm and hold them close, whether they want to be held or not. Holding our teens and hugging them heals them...releases stress...and lets them know they're valued and loved just for being who they are.

My husband is the grandparent to our teen in the family, and I watched after a particularly hard loss recently, as Mister grabbed Gideon and hugged him. I have no idea what was said, but Gideon leaned his head into Mister's chest and they lingered. Lingering hugs are the best. It gives time for connection, for words or no words, and it allows vulnerability and safety.

So, if we're a grandparent, we can save those words of criticism or disappointment for our plants...not people. And we can grab those teens, whether they're 13 or 15 or almost 20, and hold them tight.

They might need a hug when they didn't make the team.

They might need a hug when their best friend lied behind their back.

They might need a hug when they made a huge mistake.

They might need a hug for no reason at all, except because...

I recently read about all the benefits of hugs. We all need them. And while we might be tempted to withhold them for various reasons, let's don't. Our teens do need the hugs, but we need them just as much. Oftentimes, we want to correct or instruct, but there are times when hugs are high on the list of actions towards our kids that are trying to grow up and encounter this harsh world.

So offer some hugs all around this Christmas, as the teens in your crowd show up for dinner, as they open their gifts, or as they pass by your way. Hug them tight and tell them they are loved, always. And that you're praying for them, always. And you're their champion, always.

Practical Parenting – On a Mission – by Marcy Lytle

He's got a blower in his hand, a weed eater in his "truck" and even a ladder and "worker guy" clothes that he wears when he's on the job. This sweet boy is always on a mission to take care of whatever "yard" is before him. It might be the living room, the hallway or his bedroom. Or it can be his real backyard. It doesn't matter if it's real - he's got the tools to get the job done.

I love pretending with 2-year old Camp. From the moment he got these two yard tools for his birthday, he has been blowing and going, happy as can be. He also loves to pretend that we're setting up an ice cream shop or store, or a restaurant serving the most delicious foods on little plastic plates and taking pretend sips from tiny multi-colored cups.

And it's now Christmas time. I have no idea whether or not his parents will tell him about Santa, or if Santa will be "real" or just a figure in a story. It's not my business to know. But I do know that pretending and playing make-believe is part of kids and their growing up process. It gives them purpose in their little lives.

When they bring out the babies and put them in the tiny strollers and carry their little backpacks with a plastic bottle that doesn't really pour liquid, these little kiddos are pretending to be parents. They're mimicking their own mom and dad. They're on a mission to becoming good parents like the ones they have.

When they run around the yard and climb up in their playhouses, planting fake flowers and looking out tiny windows, and mashing kinetic sand in little boxes, creating and wishing and talking and playing with little figures in that sand...they're on a mission. That mission is to think and create and enjoy life to the fullest without a care in the world.

When they set up their stuffies against a wall and line up books for them to read, calling each bear and dog and penguin by name, as they read the stories out loud – well isn't that the cutest!? The little future librarians or writers or animal lovers are on a mission to discovering what it is they love about reading and life and all things for their future.

Camp was playing with one of his friends recently, and that friend's mom captured both of them with yard tool in hand, stomping through a "forest" of trees and weeds to cut down, with the most determined looks on their little faces. It was the cutest picture ever.

Sure, our mission in life as parents is to nourish and train and teach and love on our kids, but isn't it also to encourage that make believe world where things are all fun and perfect and giggly and happy? That's part of our mission too, as we plop down on the floor beside them to pretend play and then send them on their way...away from the harshness of the world...while we make believe all day.

Brought to Mind - Oklahoma Cookies – by Lindsay Christianson

Years before I was born, my great-grandmother ordered a set of cookie cutters in the mail from Oklahoma. They're still a holiday staple today. The red plastic shapes cut and mold cookie dough into cute holiday shapes, perfect for decorating. We use the recipe that came with the cookie cutters and a simple powdered sugar glaze and food coloring to create "paint."

It's been a family tradition to paint cookies for the holidays ever since my mom and her sister were little. Over the years, our cookie cutter collection grew to include more than the originals. When I was little, my mom's mom made cookies for almost every holiday. Now, she only makes the cookies for Christmas, using the trusty Santa cookie cutter from Oklahoma.

When we host Christmas at our house, my mom and I make the cookie recipe, but we've come up with a variation. We're impatient in the Christianson household, so painting Mr. Claus's detailed face on several dozen cookies doesn't have the same appeal it did in childhood. So, we've found some new cookie cutters that are easier to use, and we dust the cookies with sparkling colored sugar instead of icing.

Our family has never been one for super strict traditions. I'm glad of that. I don't really enjoy symbols or ceremonies. A simple cookie recipe that we've put our own spin on over the years is all we really need to signal the season and inspire nostalgia.

Families change, and traditions will change too. Often in ways a lot more significant than switching from icing to sprinkles. I think it's best to hold the traditions loosely. Perhaps a little change is what is needed to keep them from being lost. And, usually, you'll find the new memories are just as sweet.

It wouldn't be in the Christmas spirit for me to talk about a cookie recipe and not share it, would it?

Oklahoma Cookies:

4 ½ C flour

½ tsp baking soda

½ tsp salt

1 ½ C sugar

1 C shortening

1 tsp almond extract

2 tsp vanilla extract

3 eggs

1. Sift together flour, baking soda, and salt
2. Cream sugar, shortening, almond, vanilla, and eggs
3. Combine mixtures and chill.
4. Roll and cut out cookies on a floured surface.
5. For the colored sugar variation, sprinkle cookies before baking.
6. Bake at 350 F for 10 minutes.

7. For the “painted” variation, let cool and decorate with powdered sugar icing.

Powdered Sugar Icing:

Milk (you can use regular milk or evaporated milk)

Powdered sugar

Food coloring

Put powdered sugar into small bowls (one for each color) and add milk. There’s no real recipe for this. We typically just eyeball it. The trick is to add the milk in very small amounts, stirring in between, until you get a consistency you like. If you get it too thin, just add a bit more sugar. Once you have a paintable consistency, add in the food coloring until you have the color you want. Then use small paint brushes to decorate the cookies.

A Night to Remember – The Neighborhood Walk – by Marcy Lytle

Kids love to look at Christmas lights and hopefully you have a night planned to drive and look at them as a family! But for this family devo for December, get out and walk a neighborhood. It can be your own or one you know that is well decorated in every yard! Why? Because it's fun, and it can be part of the discussion when you return home to hot chocolate and cookies.

Preparation: Pick the neighborhood. Look for the following items (you can print out the list for kids to check off if you wish!): reindeer, Santa, manger scene, peppermint candies, gingerbread men, stars, something blue, bells, and cartoon characters, as well as music. Then head back home for cookies and milk, or peppermints and hot cider, as you talk about what you saw on your neighborhood walk.

Christmas is full of all sorts of images that people like to place on their lawns. And a manger scene is one of many. And while it's the focal point of the Christmas Story, there are good things to be noted about the other images as well!

Reindeer – what's the story of Rudolph? He's got a big red nose and other reindeer shun him, but who awards him the privilege of driving the sleigh? Good ole' Santa! Santa isn't real, but Jesus is, and that's just what he does for us. He values how we are made and honors us with his love and presence, and delights in giving us things to do for Him and for others.

Santa - St. Nicholas, or Santa, was a monk way back centuries ago that gave away his inherited wealth to help the poor and sick. That's still the idea today that treats will land in our stockings and under our trees. And where do good gifts ultimately come from? Not St. Nick but from our good, good Father.

Manger Scene – We see baby Jesus and his parents Mary and Joseph, and maybe the shepherds nearby. It's of utmost importance that we believe and know the love of Christ who willingly came to earth to obey his Father's will, to save mankind from sin, and offer us eternal life with him.

Peppermint candies – Supposedly in 1670, a choirmaster gave out sugar sticks to keep kids quiet during Christmas Eve mass. He asked the candy maker to add a crook to the top of the candy to represent the shepherds who visited Jesus. And they're white for purity and have red stripes for Jesus' blood, spilled for us all. Pretty cool!

Gingerbread men - The tradition of making gingerbread men specifically is said to have originated in the court of Queen Elizabeth I of England, who had gingerbread cookies made in the likeness of her favorite courtiers. Did you know we are made in the likeness of God – in his image?

Star – well we know where that came from – a star appeared in the sky and the shepherds followed it to Jesus. We see stars every night in the dark sky, to light up the darkness. Jesus is the light of the world, the Shining Star!

Bells – The Hebrew word for bell means beautiful. Churches ring bells to call people to worship. So when we see bells in yards and hanging from branches, we can remember to worship Jesus and sing beautiful songs to show our love.

Blue – This might not be a “traditional” color for Christmas but lots of people use it, and blue lights on a house are so warming and beautiful. God doesn’t love us because of our color or a traditional way we look like everyone else. He loves us because He made us. So enjoy blue or red or even pink if you want...for the holidays!

Those big blowups – They’re everywhere and they’re often Mickey or Minnie, or Goofy or the Grinch – and kids love them. They’re larger than life and they’re associated with a story...and the characters in that story. Enjoy them, marvel at them, and wonder at all the stories that are told at Christmas time. And give thanks for the one true story of the Christ Child in the manger...

Which was your favorite that you saw as we walked? Why?

Let’s pray:

Jesus, thank you for Christmas time and for all the lights and colors and images that represent your love for us all. We pray for all the homes we passed by tonight, for peace and joy and salvation. Thank you for being the Light of the World, and help us to represent your light to those around us. Amen.

In Each Room – The Hall Tree – by Marcy Lytle

Do you have a hall tree, or hooks, or a coat rack near your door? A lot of homes do, and while they're great for tossing and hanging all the things, they often get messy. And yet, they're the first thing we see when we walk in the door and the last place we grab from when we're leaving. I have to organize mine often, and I enjoy it. And it's fun to make it pretty, as well as functional.

There are basically seven things we have in our entry hall tree, to make it useful to both of us. We have bags and totes, and scarves. We have umbrellas, gloves and caps or hats. We, of course, have coats! And finally, we have a basket to hold things we need to remember to take.

It's fun to create a cohesive look when arranging all these things.

Most of our coats hang in a coat closet because they're bulky. But I sometimes hang one that's pretty on a hook on the hall tree, or leave one hook blank for guests.

I love to change out my purses, but I won't remember to do so if they're tucked back in my bedroom closet. I choose several for the season and some go in the drawers beneath the bench, and a couple of pretty ones hang on the hooks.

Next, I love to drape a pretty scarf that coordinates, over the bags. I have a few more in the drawer, but these are great to grab on those cold days when I need that extra warmth before heading out the door!

Our hall tree has a few pockets along the back that can hold small umbrellas and gloves, or we can lean a pretty umbrella against the side.

As for hats and caps, we both wear these! We have a couple of deep baskets sitting on the bench which we can fill with caps, stacked on each other. And I can hang one pretty cap on a hook atop one of the bags.

Regarding those baskets, I found them at Marshalls and they fit great on the bench. When we have to remember to take the kids something, or we have a gift to carry to a party, or any item we might forget to take when we leave, we can sit it in the basket or on top.

Now, this area can go from pretty to pretty awful every single week, so I find it actually quite fun and cathartic to organize it weekly, sometimes changing it up a bit, depending on the season and the weather.

So, whatever you have in your entry, use it and decorate it. You can even add ambience with a battery operated light nearby, or a seasonal piece of décor hanging or sitting. Make it inviting as you come and go. And enjoy the process of keeping it tidy.



YOU

A Hopeful Heart – Roots – by Christina Oberon

I recently visited Sequoia National Park and was struck by the sheer magnitude of the roots of fallen trees. Looking at them and tracing my hand across their ridges, I fell into deep thought with the idea of roots, those forces that connect us to what matters most and nourish us from beneath the surface. Observing these visible roots became a vivid symbol for my own sense of grounding and growth, for what keeps me steady and strong. Roots bind us to our heritage, provide nourishment, and serve as the unseen foundation of who we are.

Walking through the ancient forest, I thought about how, like these trees, I too am supported by a network of connections and experiences that define who I am. Just as roots anchor trees and hold them steady through storms, my “roots” are my family, friends, and the experiences that have shaped me. The values and memories passed down through generations give me stability and perspective, allowing me to stay rooted, even when life is turbulent. I thought about how, in nature, roots are vital for survival. They dig deep, reaching for water and nutrients hidden beneath the surface, while unseen branches stretch towards sunlight and air. The strength of my roots, much like those of the trees I walked among, enables me to reach upward while staying grounded.

This beautiful forest walk also made me reflect on how cultural roots define my place in the world. Family traditions, heritage, and values handed down through the years are part of what makes me who I am. As life gets faster and the world becomes more complex, I realize it's easy to lose track of this heritage. But stepping back to honor these roots, learning about my ancestors, embracing family stories, and sharing them with my son, can help keep those traditions alive. Much like the roots of a Sequoia, our roots connect us across time, grounding us in our unique stories and giving us a framework to navigate the present.

Standing among those trees, I was reminded, too, of how we're all connected in ways that aren't always visible. Just as each tree is part of the larger forest, we are part of a broader community, and these connections are like invisible roots that link us all. The characteristic of roots in the natural world teaches us about the importance of having a stable foundation in our lives, a set of core values, supportive relationships, and a strong sense of self. Nurturing my relationships, sharing my experiences with others, and being open to theirs all help create the strength that a community needs to thrive and are a reminder that we are part of something interconnected.

Staring at these massive roots in awe, I kept thinking about how deep their history goes and wondering about all they have endured and withstood over time. It is the same for all of us. Our history goes deep and experiences leave a mark on us. Like a gardener tending to roots so they can grow strong, I have a desire to take the time to explore my inner roots and continue to grow.

Ultimately, I left Sequoia with a heightened interest in my roots, those sources of strength and identity that ground me. My roots give me the resilience to stand tall, the wisdom to grow, and the perspective to pass these connections on. I believe that the deeper and more secure my roots, the more I can give back to the world around me, nurturing the next generation and contributing to the shared story we all create together. It's beautiful to know that embracing these roots, in myself and my family, is one of the most meaningful ways I can honor the life I am building.

Under Pressure – A False Light – by Debbie Haynes

Maybe it's a funny title for a story in December, but nevertheless, these are different times and if we're not very alert, we can miss it. Deception is so prevalent in our society – at every turn – and even in the church. We are often warned of false teachers, a different gospel, all misleading people to accept a false Jesus, not the Jesus of scripture.

False teachers deceive people by using lies and crafty arguments about doctrine, false philosophical reasoning and emotional appeals. And while I personally saw and recognized these things in society at large, they seemed far-fetched, and I never thought I would fall for such a thing.

We read in Romans 16 that we are to avoid those that cause division and create obstacles, using contrary doctrine to what we read in scripture. These people only serve their own appetites and use smooth talk and flattery, and we are to be wise and recognize what is good and what is evil. In Matthew 7 we are told there will be those that come in, wearing sheep's clothing, but they're really ravenous wolves, inside.

Here's my recent experience:

In our church, three young people visited and offered me to join their bible study and their theology classes, offered free to pastors. I was interested because of my own feelings of inadequacy so I asked them questions about their training and instructors, etc. But when I started pressing for these answers, about their funding and their beliefs, I got lies...polite lies. They answered with untruths, but I didn't realize it at first.

I decided to join on line to see what they were about, they sang popular songs, but were completely joyless and spirit-less and dead. They had power points and testimonies and I received texts and emails. And I began to research their name. And then...they said I'd been chosen to attend their annual convention...and oh yeah...in Korea!

I soon found out that this group was a cult. A very aggressive cult that is dangerous, it preys on weak people, relationships that have failed, those financially insecure, and I had been too eager to take part in their training. The cult was totally based on deception, everything was hidden, and they told nothing but lies...then requiring separation from family, friends and churches. There are 250,000 known cult members in South Korea and 60% joined during the Covid shutdown! This cult has taken over churches, pastor, and finances and directed them for their own use.

Here is how deceptive cults work:

They reinterpret who Jesus is – NOT God – and there is no trinity

They deny Jesus' bodily resurrection and say in 1966 Jesus revealed himself to seven men in Korea – one of whom was Jesus. That man died and the new John, aka Jesus, was one of the seven.

This cult walked directly into our church and presented itself as “light.” And I felt absolutely horrible for not immediately recognizing this, and for wanting to get involved for theology training.

But a sweet friend said this experience has now helped me to warn others, because it could happen anywhere. This cult had identified 400 churches in our area to visit!

Many Christians recoil when they hear negativity about another group, calling it gossip. But if it's another gospel without Jesus, we are to avoid them. We have to be aware and research before following others.

I'm so thankful for being kept from deception. And I want to be prepared to recognize fruit, whether it's good and pure, or not. And while I experienced this myself, I now realize it is serious business to know the Word of God, and not follow a false light.

Inner Strength - The Right Words – by Michelle Wyatt

Do you ever wonder - when you're talking to your kids - if you're saying the *right* thing?

Recently, my son Brendan, who has autism, asked me a question that I was not prepared to answer. He asked, "Why do I have a brother that's so different than me?" I believe the Holy Spirit helped me answer that question.

I told him that differences are an opportunity to grow, to experience life in ways you wouldn't otherwise. I reminded him that part of having autism is having difficulty coping with differences. Very quietly, I saw the serious pondering look. I know he's always thinking. I can only hope that he quieted his mind long enough to hear my answer to his question.

I've learned over the years that if I say too much, I lose him. So I will ask him, "What did you hear me say?" It's a great question to ask any child. It especially tells me whether I said too much. Brendan is a thinker and looks for things to make sense, so it's easy for me to think he needs me to explain. I am still trying to figure out that dance, so to speak. Brendan is super intelligent and analytical. I can be analytical too, but nowhere close to how he thinks.

His younger brother Matthew has a hard time sitting still and listening for very long, so I know for him I need to keep things short and sweet. He makes sense of the world mostly by observing. Because he has ADHD-like tendencies, I know that he gets frustrated if he has to stop doing what he's doing to listen to me for very long. Does this sound familiar?

I've learned with Matthew that when he gets defensive and interrupts me when I'm talking to him, sometimes it's because I've hit a nerve and he's uncomfortable with the topic. I will explain more in my next article exactly what I'm talking about; but for example; if it has to do with family dynamics and communicating feelings Matthew always wants to protect himself from the sad feelings and goes towards anger more quickly.

So in regards to whether or not I'm saying the right thing, it is definitely a dance, as I mentioned above.

It takes a lot of strength to be patient with oneself, especially as a parent who wants to do right by his or her kids. It is important to remember that reactions we get from our kids aren't usually about us, but more about what they are going through.

So, if I can do it, so can you!

Healthy Habits – The Stack – by Marcy Lytle

What's in your stack of books that you're reading, or on your wish list, or among your thoughts of what you want to read...if you have the time? One of my wishes for this holiday season is to take five and read more...all different kinds of stories. Reading might be one of the healthiest things we can do for ourselves when we have the least amount of time to read – like when we're super busy! Taking out time to sit down, rest our feet, engage our minds and slip away to another time, another place, or to a comfortable resting spot...might be just what our souls need as we end 2024.

Here are some examples of what's in my stack:

A recommendation – Sometimes a friend will mention a book to me and I'll order and place in my stack. This time it's a 52 week devotional that looks amazing, and I want to read it with my husband one night a week as the new year begins. Encouraging words – always the best.

An inspiration – If you haven't read Be the Gift by Ann Voskamp, place this book in your stack and enjoy her unique way of writing as you encounter all sorts of ways to be a blessing.

A fun one – My daughter gave me The Third Gilmore Girl to read, for my birthday. I loved The Gilmore Girls way back when, and now my daughter and her friends are fans too! And I loved the mom in that show – so this book is by her!

A mystery – I met an author at a festival and her stories looked intriguing, so I bought one of her books. I always love supporting local authors if I can!

A vintage – Have you visited the vintage stores just looking for books? I have a cookbook and a “girls' book” I'm excited to read and enjoy, and I love the green book covers!

A whimsical – I was in Five Below and saw a book called Jane Austen's Table and I grabbed it. Recipes and cute ways of decorating – why not? Will I ever make them or use these ideas? I hope so!

A seasonal – I just finished The Pumpkin Spice Café – an easy read and enjoyable – and a pretty cover – always a must as each season changes. A little romance, a cute town, fun characters – what's not to love? I'm reading this month O'Henry at the Holidays.

A cookbook – Are these out of style, because we have the internet? I hope not! I love the photos, the feel of the pages, all the hints and the ingredients, and recipes that make me want to cook! One of my favorites is one with pesto recipes to try.

The bible – I often get up early and read scripture on biblegateway.com on my phone, or start writing devotionals using the bible as my guide. It's the best book to have in your stack.

Sometime I don't read at all, because I either feel guilty for taking the time to do so, or I let my to-do list rule my day. But when I take time to sit in a comfy chair near a window, or pull over under a tree in a parking lot, just to open a book and read a while...I'm escorted away from today's troubles. And that's healthy living on a daily basis.

Life Right Now - Choose Kindness - Jennifer Stephens

Some people are just mean. They do or say rude things to another person for no reason. Not that there's really ever a reason to be purposefully unkind. But it happens. It's terrible when somebody we know - maybe a family member, a friend, or a colleague - is the perpetrator of the meanness, but it's bizarre when the malevolent behavior is thrashed upon us by a total and complete stranger! Like the time a stranger's nasty comment was tossed in my direction.

It was a Sunday spent like any other. My husband and I were quietly strolling through the aisles of Costco after church. We were minding our own business, filling our cart with gigantic packages of toilet paper and huge boxes of Ziploc freezer bags, as well as a giant container of M&M's we didn't need, when my ears perked up. "Mrs. Frizzle," uttered with a laugh came from a voice behind me. As the owner of the voice slithered up beside us in the aisle it became apparent that she was facetimeing with another lady and I was the topic of this callous conversation! Glancing at the woman's phone I noticed she was showing my outfit to her friend while they giggled, comparing me to the eccentric character from *The Magic School Bus* series. And not in a nice way.

The *Magic School Bus* is a series of children's books (and later a '90's cartoon) featuring a kooky teacher, Mrs. Frizzle, known for wearing wacky dresses. Believe me. I am well aware that my typical fashion style could be interpreted as similar to this beloved book character. Most days will find me in a mid-century style dress covered in a splashy, bright colored print, poofed out with a petticoat, and finished off with shiny bow-topped shoes worn in a snazzy shade. Not the comfortably casual clothes worn by most other Sunday shoppers, but it's me. Fashion is fun! And I don't dress this way in an effort to seek attention, but sometimes my outfits do cause others to comment. I've been compared to Mrs. Frizzle before (which is why my ears tuned in when I heard her name), but it's usually complimentary, like "Oh my goodness, I love your dress! It's like something Mrs. Frizzle would wear!" And I love that! No ill intent detected.

But with the facetimeing mean girls, er, women, at Costco, their words, their laughter, their tone...the fact that when she noticed me noticing her and still didn't stop the catty commentary, well...it hurt my feelings. Why was my outfit so incredibly jarring to this lady that she felt it necessary to facetime a friend about it, I wondered. Why was this lady so intent on being rotten to a stranger? Even the sweet compliments sent my way from other shoppers, while we continued to venture up and down the rows of over-sized boxes of cereal, books, and other sundries, didn't erase that lady's unwarranted behavior. At least not right away. Luckily, I know in my heart it's only God I need to please - not some random sweatpants wearing lady at Costco.

The world can be a tough place to maneuver sometimes. And while overhearing a nasty fashion critique isn't the worst thing that can happen on a Sunday outing, I wrote about it for several reasons. First as a reminder to choose kindness. To remember the golden rule: "If you don't have something nice to say, then don't say anything at all." Second, to show that even middle-aged women aren't immune to hurt feelings when on the receiving end of the dreaded "mean girl" behavior. It stings. And most importantly, when we do find ourselves absorbing the hateful words launched our way, to always look towards God. Don't let anybody's vicious words seep into our souls.



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Digging into Hope – by Bekah Holland

December...the month of perpetual hope. Also the month of perpetual anxiety, but I try really really REALLY hard to focus on the hope part. Because my regular, every day anxiety is plenty, thank you very much. But there is always so much to do and this time of year seems to fly by so quickly that I rarely know what day it is. Although to be fair, it's not often that I ever know what day it is, so I can't really blame that on the holidays.

This time of year is such a juxtaposition in my little world. I both look forward to and dread it equally. I love spending time with my family, even though we are as opposite as night and day, or any other comparison that shows how different we are. I love to give. I love being able to do things for others and splurge a little on the people in my life. I've been thinking about this more over the last couple of years, because these years have been HARD. Our family has been stretched in ways that have been very humbling. Personally, mentally, emotionally, financially. Giving has looked a lot differently for us. It's looked like giving space when we need to not be okay for a little while. Sometimes it's looked like volunteering in our community. At times, it's even looked like us having to be vulnerable and asking for help so we could give our kids the things they needed. In case anyone is wondering, asking for help is not in the top 178 things I'm good at. Funny enough it is pretty high up on my list of things I tell other people is a sign of strength and not weakness, but apparently I'm much better at telling other people things than following my own advice. If you are rolling your eyes right now, don't worry, I'm rolling my eyes at me right now too if that makes you feel any better.

But all of this has also taught me, albeit painfully, to look at gifts from a different perspective. This is because, while I can't give much in the stuff that costs actual money category, I can give in other ways. To my kids, **I can give them my undivided attention.** I tend to try to do all the things, which means I'm usually doing at least six of them at any given time. And while lots of those things are for them, they deserve to have me, without the baggage I'm usually carrying. They have a busy mom. They compete with a million other distractions, mine and theirs. How many more days do I have where they're home, and still sometimes want a hug from their mom or to watch funny videos together or just talk about their day? So my gift to them is to do my best to be more present and make our time together matter and mean something.

My husband is getting a similar gift. He unfairly gets what's left of my busy, multi-tasking, and unfortunately distracted brain. I try to turn all my stuff off when it's really important or he needs me. But the rest of the time, I find myself giving him my leftovers. Not intentionally of course. But while digging into hope, I ended up realizing a lot about myself, and self-reflection isn't always easy or fun. It does end up, (if you're me and have a tendency to dig yourself into rabbit holes and learning that the problem is the person I usually see in the mirror), while humbling, also really helpful. And I can't always see where I'm falling short. And the person that I stood, sweating, quite literally, through our vows with in Texas summer heat because I'm an idiot who planned an outdoor wedding in July, is the last person who deserves less of my attention. That means for me, **I need to be intentional when I sit down with my husband.** Even if he is listing college football stats or rolling his eyes as he talks about a player who he's told me about 87 times and I still can't remember who it is. Even when I'm busy. Even when I'm tired. I'm not saying that I need to ignore my needs or rest, but I have plenty of time to juggle the other things that life throws our way. I need to remember that our time together is precious and even if I do zone out once we start in on future high school recruits, I need to reign back in to make sure he and I are spending time listening to each other, especially to the things that aren't being said. Because sometimes those are the most important things to tune in to and recognize when our partner is struggling or needing a reminder of who they are and all they are capable of. I want

to be his biggest cheerleader, loudest fan and I can't do that well when I'm doing mental gymnastics during our little bit of time together that doesn't overlap with football, life, budgeting and oh, yeah, that little bit of figuring out how to parent our teens. Time is one of our most valuable commodities and I'm on a mission to make sure that I'm using mine in the right place and for the right people. My people. Both blood and chosen family.

So this year, while you may not have the holiday season you had scripted out in your head, you still have plenty of ways to create more opportunities to hope bigger and love better. Also, stop trying to script these events, because as I repeated learn, forget, smack myself for forgetting, try again (wash, rinse, repeat), they never turn out that way and it's easier to wing it than deal with unmet (and sometimes unrealistic) expectations. Look for the small ways we can show our people that we love them, whether that's more quality time (I know, we don't have any, but we'll find it anyway), more holding hands, more notes in lunch boxes or making their morning coffee. We may not have as much to give when it comes to things that cost money, but **we can always give more love, more time, more snuggles.**

The dishes will be there long after my kids don't want to cozy up on the couch with me and a good movie anymore. The grocery list will still be there long after I spend some extra time encouraging my partner, my family, friends and even myself. This is my gift this year, so when I've got all the time in the world to do the dishes, and there isn't nearly as much laundry waiting to be finished, I'll have the memories I chose to create while letting the chore list that fills up my head wait, instead of the people who fill up my heart.

"Sometimes, you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory." Dr. Seuss

Date Night Fun – All the Lights – by Marcy Lytle

Back when it was Halloween, we noticed how many folks and neighbors actually lit up their yards in orange lights for the night when kids would knock on their doors! And now it's Christmas time, and that orange is now red, or green, or multiple colors, and yards are starting to shine on every block. I love it! So I thought how fun it would be to incorporate something about lights for our date night ideas this month.

- **Take a Stroll** – Head out walking in a neighborhood that has lots of lights and walk for blocks. Cozy up with scarves and gloves, and sip on hot cider while you stroll. Just enjoy the walk and the conversation about the colors and the yards and the joy of lights at Christmas. A simple idea, yet so romantic and fun.
- **Enjoy a Show** – There's a coffee house in our city that puts on a light show on the deck outside, where people come and sip coffee and watch the lights that are synchronized with music. So search your area and see if you can find a light show to enjoy, or make plans to visit a show or performance where kids are singing or dancing, or a full choir is dressed up and lights sparkle on the stage. Get your tickets and enjoy!
- **Candlelit Dinner** – You can go out, or stay in, but find a spot with candles that flicker while you eat. Why do candles speak romance? I don't know, but they do. Sometimes we set up our card table, throw on a tablecloth, add candles, and watch a TV movie while we eat in the flicker of the glow. Make the meal simple, or decadent, or just do dessert.
- **Walk the Mall** – I know many don't frequent the malls as often as we all did pre-Covid (remember that time – oh my), but go out during the Christmas season and walk, shop, get a pretzel, sit down and people watch, and maybe buy a gift or two. And by all means, notice the lights that are in the mall and in the stores, and wonder at the beauty of the season, together.
- **Add Music** – We always plan at least one dressed up affair for the holiday season, and this year it's Kenny G in concert at a vintage theater in our city. Christmas lights are strung in the downtown streets, and we will walk under those to the concert. And inside there will be lights as well, to go with the music. Music and lights. A great combo, don't you think?

Look around and see the lights together this season. Invite friends to join. Turn the lights down low at home. Flicker those candles and enjoy the scents. Ahhhh...it's awesome when all the lights are all around.

After 40 Years – Still Styling – by Marcy Lytle

One thing that can easily happen in a marriage is to stop grooming and looking good for each other because you've been married "so long." I've seen it happen in old age, but when does it start? I don't know, but I'm thankful that Jon still enjoys shopping for clothes (on occasion) and shoes (more often) and that he keeps a neat and trimmed beard (most always).

I thought it would be fun this month to share what he likes and where we find it, and how I offer input (but nicely.)

It might be an unlikely stop for a man in his late 60's, but we often browse at Tilly's for their jeans (RSG brand) and their shirts. This pinstripe shirt he's wearing is from there, and I think it looks sharp on him. Browsing stores that aren't the huge department stores keeps him dressed in a bit more youthful styles (which I love... and tell him so!) We recently found the best plaid flannel shirts and bought two!

A familiar store is Old Navy, and we often stop in there for a look, because it seems that something is always on sale on any given week! I've even found myself some great t-shirts in the men's department because I love the sleeve and neckline better than those in the women's area. We recently found Jon a pretty green coat for the colder months ahead...on sale, of course.

Once in a while, Jon will look at Ross with me (although he calls it the garage sale store). I love browsing the aisles! We have found really cool t-shirts and even sometimes shoes – a recent pair he now calls his fave! I think shoes are best found here, because they're name brand but at a lower price!

One tried and true shoe store for Jon is Aldo's where he says he's never gotten an uncomfortable shoe. And we've been stopping in this store for years! We just wait for sales or hit the Aldo's in the outlet mall.

As for grooming, Jon loves the Harry's razors and recently discovered a cologne we both love from Rugged Beard Company. It would make a great gift for him! He uses goat milk soap from Bend Soap, and loves to open new handmade soaps for bathing, which we find at the markets. I love this about him!

And guess what? He doesn't know it yet, but I found a nice robe with boxers that I'm wrapping and placing under the tree...from Amazon. I'm hoping for some cozy mornings by the fire this season, and he and I can both wear our robes and grab a blanket and watch a show.

Jon's not a fashionista by any stretch, and I don't like anything he ever picks out for me. Honest confession. I'm way too picky. However, when he shops with me I love stepping over into the men's area to see what he likes, and then arrive home where he tries the pieces on for me, in front of the long mirror. And he looks so good in green, especially!

He's so cute...still...after all these years.

For Better or Worse - Don't Forget to Laugh – by Kaelin Scott

They say laughter is the best medicine, which is lucky for me because I married a total goofball.

My husband makes me laugh more than anybody else. It's actually one of the things that drew me to him most when we were first getting to know each other. He's always telling silly jokes or just doing goofy things that make me smile. Even when I'm mad, I can't stay that way for long because he always manages to coax a laugh out of me. It's a quality I'm really grateful for, even if I try to deny it sometimes.

Life is so serious these days, isn't it? It seems like the older you get, the less time you have for laughter. Or maybe that's just me. Between work and kids and chores and everything else, it can be easy to forget to enjoy life. We don't take the time to stop and smell the roses because we're too busy trying to get things done. But isn't it so nice when we do slow down and have some fun? When we just take the time to be happy and smile and laugh and remember that the world can be a really beautiful place.

I think laughter is good medicine, and it's a necessary part of marriage too. Two people can't share a meaningful life if they don't have fun together. Sure, there are times when being serious is important, but being silly is important too. Playing and joking and laughing are vital to a healthy relationship.

We should all carve out moments of fun with our spouses. It doesn't even have to be planned in advance. Actually, it's better when it's spontaneous. Just finding little ways to joke around or be playful. Making it a point not to take life too seriously. Having fun in the midst of an otherwise mundane routine. Making each other laugh just because it feels good. That's such a beautiful thing.

I'm glad my husband is such a silly guy, otherwise I might be the world's most boring woman. But he brings out the lighthearted side of me – sometimes with a lot of coaxing – and he makes me relax and enjoy life. Everything is better with him because he makes everything fun. And we could all use a little bit of fun in our lives. In fact, I'm pretty sure we can't survive without it.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Simple Truths - Can I Have Many? – by Marcy Lytle

I suppose one of the first words a toddler learns to say and says on repeat is, “More.” And it’s so cute when they also do the sign language for “More” putting their small hands together. But for some reason, the 2-year old in our family says, “Can I have many?” It’s so cute to hear him ask, when he’s eating a bite of cookie his mom has broken off, and he knows there’s more to be enjoyed!

Yesterday at church, we sang the lyrics to a pretty song that say this:

Our sins they were many. His mercy is more.

This began my mind thinking about how so true this is. I can’t even begin to name all the things I do and have done that are contrary to what I know to do. I can’t even begin to list the many thoughts I think about myself and others that are not right, true or noble or good! So when we sang those lyrics, I was so grateful for God’s mercy to me and his daily grace extended that is more than enough to cover my many wrongdoings.

But when Camp asks, “Can I have many?” he’s asking for more of a good thing! He’s had one taste of a cookie and wants the whole thing. I’ve broken off a tiny piece of my bread and he wants the entire piece. Or when he’s offered a puff, he wants many in a cup!

Those lyrics to that song mention our many sins and his mercy that is more, but guess what else? He removes the guilt of our many sins and offers us mercy that covers them all, and then he gives us MANY blessings besides!

I don’t know what you’re hoping to find under the tree this year, or what you wish would change for the better, or what you’ve tasted a little of and want more...but we have a Father that delights in the many! So ask Him,

Can I have many?

Praying for a child that’s lost his/her way? Psalm 40:3 says this, “He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. **Many** will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him.”

Thinking what you desire is too much to ask? Psalm 40:5 says this, “**Many**, LORD my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with you; were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too **many** to declare.”

Wondering if you dare ask God such a big request? Psalm 104:24 says this, “How **many** are your works, LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.”

Thinking you aren’t worthy of a yes your prayers? 2 Corinthians 1:20 says this, “For no matter how **many** promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.”

So yes, while our sins are many, his mercy is more, and we can ask, "Can I have many?" when we taste that God is good in our lives, and his answer is yes...as he shares with us the sweetness from his table.

Dec 2024

If I had to describe in one word how I've been feeling for several months now, it would be *overwhelmed*. As a (contentedly) single woman who will soon be completing seven decades of life, who is a homeowner, gardener, writer, reader, thrifter, mother, grandmother, remodeler helper, pray-er, and more, there is much to do. I'm well aware I'm not alone. Many women juggle even more, but comparisons are neither here nor there. We are each alone in our own boiling pot, so to speak.

How did I get to this place? I have an inkling, but it's time for some serious examination, time to lay somethings down and focus on getting my life re-balanced. The discomfort of feeling overwhelmed is a kind reminder from God that peace comes from resting in him, being careful to do only what he says, and keeping my human tendency to indulge and over-do in check. While I'm doing that, I also need to complete some things hanging over my head and then reevaluate going forward.

One of the things I've decided to scale down is writing this column. But instead of giving it up altogether, I had the idea of simplifying. Instead of a story, I will offer a poem, sometimes my own, sometimes others'. I hope you will enjoy them.

Here is a spin-off inspired by John Lennon's Imagine. You can even sing it!

REIMAGINE

Imagine life everlasting
Where light and love abound
Where evil cannot enter
Where Jesus wears the crown

Imagine there's no darkness
It's easy if you try
No fear or pain or trouble
And everything is right

Imagine all the people
Living life in love
Ahh,,,

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
In the Kingdom of the Son

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
Because Christ died for you

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can

No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people
Living life in peace

Ahh...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
In the Kingdom of the Son

An Adage a Day - Should've, Would've, Could've – by Carole Gilbert

We hear this phrase quite often and in different orders. Colonial Penn Life Insurance has a commercial that says, “should've, would've, could've.” Other orders of these words are said by other people and businesses. But whatever order you use, they mean the same. This phrase is basically telling us that you can't change the past. So, don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today. Or you may regret it.

To make my point.

- **Should've-** One of my biggest regrets from raising our kids was my lack of being flexible. When we went on a trip, I would plan where we were going and all we were going to do. And it didn't matter what might get in our way or slow us down, we were going to complete the plans, no matter what. If I did hear different instructions about my plans from God, I didn't listen. He was still with us though, and for this, I am grateful.
- **Would've-** If I had known then what I know now, I would've listened better. Many times, my family and I were frustrated or disappointed because we didn't do something on our trips because it wasn't in the plans. We had to keep to our agenda to have fun. That's the way I planned it. I would've done differently if I had truly understood God was guiding us. But God was good. He was still with us, and for this, I am grateful.
- **Could've-** There were a few times I was flexible and allowed the plan to alter. One time, we were at South Padre Island, and the guys in our family were going golfing and fishing. My nine-year-old daughter and I decided we would take the guided day tour and shopping trip to Mexico. We had so much fun! And another time, on a ski trip, my daughter and I drove a few miles to Sante Fe, New Mexico, for lunch while the guys did their thing. What's funny about all this is that when I look back, I remember those times more than I remember the ones I planned. I could've stuck to my plans but I'm glad I didn't and now have these memories. God was good. He was with us. And for this, I am truly grateful.

This is December, the month we celebrate Jesus' birth. God didn't have any should'ves with what He's done. Besides, whatever we think God should've done, it's not for us to pick and choose. And He definitely didn't think, “I would've.” He has done and will do everything He plans and always with love for us in His heart. And unlike mine, His plans are perfect. For the thought, the excuse, of I could've, He didn't have that either. God does everything He promises, when He decides it's time, with no regrets, yesterday, today, and forever. He could've done things differently. But He didn't. And most importantly, He sent His son, Jesus, to fulfill His perfect plan. God is so good. And He's always with us. For all of this, I am completely and forever grateful.

2 Peter 2:21 says, For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.

This verse tells us to not regret whatever we think we should've, would've, could've done differently this Christmas or any other day. And to not second guess ourselves. With Jesus truly in our hearts, the most important part of Christmas is already done. And I'm sure each of you

have shown the beauty God put within you. Remember, God is good. He is with us. And for this, be grateful.

Rooted in Love - Goodbye, Santa – by Kaelin Scott

This is my first Christmas not getting to be Santa Claus.

Since becoming a mother in 2016, I've enjoyed being Santa Claus every year. I've always loved watching my kids open presents on Christmas morning, believing in the wonder and magic of Santa. There's just something so sweet about being a parent at this time of year, and being Santa makes it even more fun. But those days are gone for me, and I'll tell you why.

Both of my kids received Jesus as their Savior this past year, which was the greatest blessing ever. More than anything I've ever dreamed for my children, their salvation was my greatest prayer. I'm so proud of them for making that choice and I absolutely love watching their faith grow.

My husband and I both felt convicted that when they did make that choice, we should tell them the truth about Santa. It wasn't like we were trading Jesus for Santa. We always told them the true meaning of Christmas and why we celebrate it, and we always made a point of putting Jesus first. But as their hearts grew in faith, we wanted them to know the truth about Santa, and this seemed like the best time to tell them. We didn't want them to find out from someone else and think we lied, and we wanted them to know the difference between truth and fiction. If they're going to put their faith in something, then we feel it's important to be honest with them about things they might believe in.

I have to be honest. It was a tough conversation to have. Tears were shed, and not just by the kids. It was hard for me to let go of that chapter in our lives – to realize that they're outgrowing make-believe and growing into who God created them to be. By the end of our discussion, everyone felt good about things. The initial shock wore off and they understood that we pretended to be Santa to make the holiday more fun. We explained that sometimes we want to give gifts without getting all the credit, so being Santa is a way for parents to do that. We told them about the real story of St. Nick and how Santa is more of an idea than an actual person, and that we can all be Santa by doing kind things for others.

They're okay with there not being a Santa Claus, but sometimes I still feel a little sad. It's hard to admit it, but I struggle with the very thing I'm trying to teach my kids. That Christmas isn't about a jolly guy in a red suit who gives out presents. It's not about the shiny wrapping paper or the twinkly lights. It's not about music or sleigh rides or parties.

It's about Jesus and the gifts He gives us – mercy, grace, peace, love, forgiveness, joy. It's about the King of Kings coming to earth as a humble baby so He could give His life for our ransom. It's about the greatest gift of all. The gift of salvation. The gift my children have chosen to receive. And that's so much greater than any present I could ever put under the tree.

I'll miss my days of being Santa, but I'm thankful for the days I'm living now. Teaching my children what it means to live out their faith. Learning and growing together as we journey through life each day. Discovering truth and trusting Jesus to be our guide. Yes, being Santa was fun. But being a follower of Jesus is so much better. And it's even sweeter knowing that my children know the truth now, too.

Unearthly Thing - My Favorite Christmas Gift – Angela Dolbear

My favorite Christmas gift didn't come in a box or a bright-colored gift bag. It didn't come from a store or an online site.

My favorite Christmas gift is not new. And I share it with many people across the globe and across time.

My favorite Christmas gift is prayer.

Prayer as a gift? More specifically—as a Christmas gift? Yes. The gift of prayer came through my faith in Jesus Christ, whose birth is the reason we celebrate the Christmas season.

Prayer is so important to me. I pray every day, almost all day long. I start the day with a time of gratitude, which never seems to fail to give me a good attitude that lasts all day. I consider the events currently going on around me and thank God for the specific ways He has helped and is helping. Also, I thank Him for His promises, especially the promise that His mercies are new every morning.

I'm not a morning person, so designating the first half hour or so of the day in a time of gratitude is incredibly helpful, especially when I wake up too early and in a grumpy mood.

My Australian Cattle dog Sally knows when I first awake and comes over to my side of the bed. It's almost as if she can hear my eyelids open. I can try to pretend that I'm still asleep, but I feel her sweet brown eyes staring at me.

Her urgent expression looks as if she is certain a herd of cattle has magically appeared on our corner lot in suburban Nashville. She requires me to get out of my warm, cozy bed to open the back door so she can herd the imaginary cattle to another part of the yard. So, I peel back the covers and get out of bed to let her and her packmates, Chocolate Lab Abby, and black cat Maddy outside and begin my day.

Instead of feeling like Miss Cranky Pants, I smile at my fur-pals frolicking around our yard, chasing squirrels, and greeting neighborhood dogs and their owners as they pass our home on their morning walks. I am thankful for them. More prayers of gratitude.

Over the past month, my church has been teaching on prayer, focusing on different aspects of prayer as seen in the Bible. The teachings focused on prayer as an inheritance, incense, intimacy, and an invitation to action.

I cherished learning more about the attributes of prayer. Here are some points that I found impactful that I want to share with you and remind me for future reference:

- Praying in Jesus's name is asking on His authority

- Draw near to God in prayer with confidence and boldness because of Jesus's saving grace (see [Hebrews 10:19-20](#))
- Prayer is incense, rising to God as worship
- Prayer is drawing near to God where He promised to draw near to us (see [James 4:8](#))
- We can be transparent to God, He knows all
- We can cry out to Him for anything – He is our Father, and we are His children
- The prayers of a righteous person are powerful (see [James 5:13-18](#), it's so good!)

I heard stories about powerful prayers in the bible that changed difficult scenarios, such as Elijah praying for rain to stop and start up again in I Kings 18. Also, the prophet Elisha prayed for his servant's eyes to be opened to see God's spiritual army protecting them when he was frightened.

There's still so much more to learn about prayer. I am amazed at its power and how talking with God is needed, and it changes me.

I love that I can go to God in prayer anytime, in any posture, and He hears me and sometimes speaks to me, especially in times of great need. That loving relationship with the Creator of the universe means everything to me.

I thank my Father in Heaven for the gift of prayer. It will always be my favorite gift, my special Christmas gift.

A very Merry Christmas to you and yours!

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, as well as many short stories. Her novels are available on Amazon in paperback, Kindle, and audiobook formats. Angela writes real, relatable, and reverent fiction. She loves reading, writing prose, and writing and recording music with her husband Tim in their studio in Nashville, TN—listen to her new album STORMS on your favorite music streaming service. Please drop by and sign up for news, read new stories, and hear new original music at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>. Blessings to you!

Moving Forward – Words of Life – by Pam Charro

I have spent too many years of my Christian life unaware of the power of my words. I can't really explain the reason that I was careless for so long in this way, as the Bible makes it very clear that God spoke creation into being, and we are made in his image. Regardless, I don't recall it being talked about much in church until fairly recently; maybe that's part of the reason I didn't really consciously think about it.

But it's HUGE!

In Ezekiel 37, the Lord showed the prophet a seemingly hopeless army of dry bones and directed him to speak words of life over it. Those bones rose, as the power of God and his words restored them, and stood strong again! In Mark 11, Jesus taught the disciples that anyone could speak to a mountain and command it to be thrown into the sea, and if that person believed it would happen, it would! And Proverbs 18 says that the power of life and death are in the tongue. So it's obvious that God cares very much about the words that are spoken by his children.

Since becoming more aware of my words, I've found I'm also more sensitive to the words of others. Wasted, negative, empty words are harder on my ears now, and my spirit feels grieved by them. I definitely don't let myself get away with such talk anymore. I've also noticed that others seem to want to be around me more because my speech is more attractive. My hope is that others feel seen and loved after listening to me, and that it might want them to better know my beautiful God.

Too much sorrow and hopelessness exists in our world.

May my words bring hope and life.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Seen – by Marcy Lytle

Isn't being seen the root desire of every human being?

Just look at toddlers. Once they're able, they're constantly demanding attention for the adults in their lives to look at their artwork, watch their dance, or pay attention to what they're doing. The affirmation they desire from their parents and family members is really a key component to growing up with a healthy self-esteem.

Just look at those of us who have lived several decades, now. There's no sadder loneliness than to grow old with no one around that sees us. If our kids don't see our needs, if those in the world don't recognize our value, and if we aren't seen around a table gathering, we feel isolated and wonder why we're still here on this earth.

Just look at the shepherds in the Christmas story. They were among the lowliest of jobs, unnoticed, hard workers, and of great value...but hardly noticed by society. Think how seen they must have felt when an angel announcing the Messiah appeared to them...first! Having God look down and speak to them while they were tending their sheep must have been the best validation. Can you imagine?

Just look at Mary. A young girl about to be married to a carpenter, hardly even known in their village, and yet God must have seen something in his daughter Mary to call her to bear his Son – Jesus. She praised God, recognized that she'd been seen, and accepted the gift of carrying salvation to the known world. God saw her. Right where she was.

Just look at Job. Oh, he'd been seen all right, by the most misunderstanding friends that only made him feel worse. But then, after he was able to pour out his wonder and his questions and his pain, he was then seen and heard by the very God he was confused about. Job had been faithful, had God not seen that? Well yes, he had. And you know the end story of Job.

We were recently watching a series on Prime about this girl that was released from prison and given a job at a horse ranch. She was seen by one of the prison workers who saw value in her, and offered her a job. She made some mistakes right away, but her new boss also saw this young girl because she was a reflection of her own younger life. And when a young man tried to make moves on this young girl she responded,

“You don't even know me.”

I suppose one of the most beautiful aspects of the Christmas story of God so loving the world that he gave his only son to die for our sins and offer us eternal life is the fact that he saw us all. He saw us in our state of needing to be seen, in our weakest moments, when we fail miserably, in our huge successes, and in our most vulnerable state...and he loved us more.

Have you ever said to someone, “I love you,” and they respond with, “I love you more?” I bet you have. Or maybe you're the one that said it first.

I cannot even comprehend God's love, really. And I often feel I don't deserve it. I have days where I don't feel seen by anyone around me, and I don't even know who I really am, even at

my core. It's because even on my best days, some of my motives are impure, my thoughts are less than stellar about God and others, and my life isn't what I'd hoped it would be. And yet...

He sees me. He gets me. He loves me. He places value on my life. He validates who I am.

And just who is that?

I'm made in the image of a God that sees, gives, and cares selflessly, so much that he laid down his life for you and me.

And that means I am seen. Always. Forever. Stamped and sealed.

It means the same for you.

Merry Christmas.

FRESH THYME – So, You Lost – by Marcy Lytle

The election for President of the United States is over, and someone lost. Those that voted for the other candidate have reactions that went from one extreme to the other, but it seems that these days the extreme responses are more common. In-your-face responses from those that are happy with the outcome are prevalent on social media, and backlash and harsh words are present from those that lost their vote. And America again is at odds among its people.

I'm not a huge sports fan, but of course I watched my kids play and now my grandkids, and I sit with my husband to watch our favorite college football team sometimes, although I always have something on my lap to divert my attention. I don't like the yelling at games at the umpires or referees, I don't enjoy the commentary by the sportscasters on how well or poorly the players are performing, and I really don't like it when a loss occurs for the team we're rooting for because those I'm watching with get mad...

However, as parents and grandparents, we make sure that we affirm our little players after the game. Seeing our grandson hang his head at another loss for the team isn't heartwarming. And I remember so many times observing the responses of my kids when they lost. I recall my brother going to bed with a headache when the UT Longhorns lost a game. And I've heard harsh words and name calling at coaches and players when the score isn't in our favor.

So now that the election is over, in my opinion, there are proper and healthy ways to respond, and we have to be careful that we respond well...because these little kids I just referred to that play on a grass field and not on the American dream field...are watching:

First, we can pray for the winner. Prayer always moves mountains, and it's also an act of obedience, so we can pray for the winner and the loser, and for our friends that voted differently than we did.

Secondly, we can keep our mouths shut and stay away from slander. That's the worst part of the campaign, isn't it? All the back talk and digging up dirt and mean and nasty language used against each other? Slander is never pretty, or appealing, or anything our children should hear.

Thirdly, we can let it go. Anger and hate arises in election years. We are angered at those that voted differently and appalled at the fact that they did. We begin to hate what the other candidate stands for and his/her character, and that hate spills over into our every day life. Anger and hate – it's got to go – in favor of rest and trust.

Trust in what? The dollar? The government? The weather? The future?

Nope.

Those change with the wind.

But God never changes, and thankfully if we believe and love Him with all our hearts, our future is secure, no matter who's the winner of the game we just played down here.

Enjoy the Christmas season without a worry about the next four years, and rest in the security that is yours and mine.

Fresh THYME – Tethered – by Marcy Lytle

There's a tether ball in my son's backyard. I don't see these often anymore, but there it is, that ball that's on a rope that's tied to a pole. You can hit it, knock it, the wind can blow it, but it's tethered to the pole and won't fly off, go over the fence, or need to be chased.

I see this tether ball every time I look out the window of my son's house. It just hangs there, unmoved, unbothered, until someone decides to hit it. Did you know that another name for tether ball is totem tennis? I did not!

I was recently reading a book and read this passage using the word tether:

In Mitford, he'd felt tethered; tethered to the Lord's Chapel, tethered to the rectory, tethered to the little yellow house. Here, he felt as if he were falling into space, tethered only to God.

You may recognize this passage if you read the Mitford series. It was my first book to read in the series, as I just found it in a little library box, and it was titled *A New Song*. This pastor had been in this one spot for a long time and had just moved to a new area, full of the unknown, and he pined for the past...where he had been tethered.

I was thinking about the tether ball, and then I read this passage, and the last part of it stuck with me, "tethered only to God." Have you ever been in a place like that? I remember when we had a series of years where everything that could go wrong went wrong, and I felt as though the foundation of everything I knew and believed had been shaken. I pulled over because now I had a flat tire, and I remember hearing a voice asking me if all I knew was Jesus, that he loved me and died for me, and there was hope after life...was that enough?

This pastor in the book had become familiar with Mitford, the town where he felt tethered. It was a safe place and he felt at home, and his connection or tie was to the people and things there, and he was just fine with it. But when that tether or connection was severed and he and his wife had to move away, those connections were gone. But he then realized that he was still connected to God.

I like that picture. I like looking at a tether ball. For all the high winds and the knocking and the throwing, it remains fixed. And here, decades after I heard that question in my ear, I've found that when other connections break loose and I'm only connected to God, that connection really is enough.

He says he will never leave us or forsake us, and to me, that means he's got us by the hand and won't let go. He says he will hide us under his wings when storms arise, while the winds pass by. And He says he will carry us to safety when we try to wander off and break that tether.

If I could tell my younger self anything and my younger self could grasp what I was telling me, it would be that life with Christ isn't about settling in comfortable places where our surroundings make us happy. While those times are awesome and fun, they come and go and are blown by the wind. And unless we know the character of the One who gave his life for us and settled us

in for eternity next to him, we will fret and fluster constantly. And the only way we know Him is by reading about Him and leaning into him every day, over and over again.

That tether ball. It's an interesting visual, isn't it?

FRESH THYME - Why is Prayer Exhausting? – by Marcy Lytle

I have often sat down to pray, and stood up when I'm finished, only to feel quite tired and exhausted. I actually saw a list of why prayer is so exhausting, which I will share some of that here. But before I do, I think personally for me, it's most exhausting when I'm just asking for things.

In other words, when prayer is all petition, we feel drained when we're done.

I suppose we can look at a marriage relationship where one party is constantly demanding and asking things of the other. How exhausting to be the party in a constant state of want and need, and how exhausting to be the one being accosted to put out or else.

There are also prayer teachings that we've all heard about, like having a specific quiet time, spending quality time in prayer, interceding, etc. And when our prayers don't feel long enough, or we wonder if we've said the right words, or how we could better get God to hear us...there's this burden that we carry on our shoulders while we pray, and it's heavy. So it makes sense that we're tired when we get up or stop asking or decide to quit.

I remember hearing from many people that morning is the best time to pray. It should be the first thing before anything else, and anything other than that is sub-standard prayer time. But not everyone has the same mindset or schedule or timeframe or energy, and good prayer time can be later in the day, before bed, or even in the car over under a shade tree, parked and observing the leaves blow while we pray – something I've done often.

Another reason we find ourselves exhausted is because we feel like we're petitioning God to do things he already knows, and we just don't know if he will answer us or not. So we ask, because we're desperate, but we really have no faith, because God gives to some and he withholds from others, is what our minds tell us.

All of the above puts this incredible pressure on us to perform, and when we don't feel that we have (based on the outcomes of our petitions), there is the ugliest of the burdens – shame. We feel like we just can't get this prayer thing right, and God isn't listening anyway.

As 2024 comes to a close, let's all do ourselves a favor and find the pleasure in praying, instead of the exhaustion. I don't have all the answers, but I do know that prayer isn't meant to be something that drains us, but rather something that is born out of finding pleasure in his presence, and realizing that He finds us pleasurable as well.

Yes, faith is pleasing to God. So we can bring the faith that we have, even if it's weak at times, we can bring the faith that He is a good God and we trust in Him. And we can read the Word before we begin, in order to build our faith.

Next, praise and thanksgiving is the preface for pleasurable prayer. As we find things to be thankful for, from the sunrise to the food in the fridge to the paycheck we earn to the gifts under the tree, we then turn our focus upward to the Giver of all good gifts. We then exalt his name, and this in turn lifts our heads. Because, he is the Lifter of our heads.

Another way to find pleasure in prayer is to make it part of our own personal routine. If under the shade tree is the place, then go there. If in a room by a window sets your heart toward Him, then sit there. If kneeling by your bed focuses your heart into a position of humility and honor, then by all means kneel. And if late morning break with coffee in hand as you talk a walk is where you best hear his voice, then take that stroll.

All throughout scripture we are told to pray, with petition only being a small part of it. And when we do petition, we can visualize laying each request into his hands, and then we are enabled to praise and worship.

I'm thinking that the highest form of prayer would be where the biggest percentage of it is thanksgiving, and the last little sentence might be – and God please save the lost, heal the sick, and raise the dead. That's the kind of God and Father we serve, and ending a worshipful time of relationship sitting at his feet, listening and observing and thanking, is invigorating. Never exhausting.