

HOW FAR IS IT TO BETHLEHEM?

(CAN I GET THERE FROM HERE?)

By Brenda Zook

I remember a poem snippet from the “church Christmas program” days of my childhood: “It is not far to Bethlehem town, just over the hills and up and down. ...” It sounds so simple, but Christmas has become anything but simple in my world (and yours?). Getting to Bethlehem gets more complicated annually. Okay, I’ll admit it. In recent years I’ve found the feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach when I think about the annual celebration of the miracle in Bethlehem. So many distractions, hindrances, and difficulties

I WANT TO TRAVEL TO BETHLEHEM BUT I KEEP GETTING TANGLED IN THE LIGHTS.

probably not the place to agonize over what to do with the stack of lovely photo cards we ordered last year, with a picture taken last summer at the beach on the one – ONE! – day of the entire year that four of our guys were in the same place at the same time...it’s such a good picture, and we haven’t changed that much in a year and a half. If I used that picture this year, who would know? Never mind.) Scheduling gets

my steps that sometimes I wonder if it’s worth the effort.

Maybe it’s because I’m getting ...mmmm, you know, older. I’ve been doing this Christmas thing for thirty years of married life; can I say enough already? All those totes sit, waiting in the attic, and who is going to tote them? And tastefully distribute their contents all over the house? And put away what was sitting in those spots before we went “Christmas”? Stir in the agony of the greeting card ordeal – take a family picture, order reprints, write the letter, create a card, find the addresses, figure out who to add, delete, repeat, address them all, buy the USPS Christmas-y stamps, and get them sent off in a timely matter. (This is



(Clockwise from upper left) Max, Joseph, Jason, Jonathan and Adriene, James, and Brenda (Photos by Brenda Zook).

decorating, sprinkling, baking. And I haven’t touched the debacle of gift giving and shopping. Juggling lists and expectations with what seems right for each family mem-

added to the mix as we struggle to accommodate Christmas programs and parties, the annual Shepherd’s meal, the living nativity tradition, and extra church services. Oh, and which part of whose family is going to be together when, and who will host the family dinner(s)? Every activity seems to be wrapped not in swaddling clothes but in cookie dough, so that means extra hours in the kitchen, stirring, rolling, decorating, sprinkling, baking. And I haven’t touched the debacle of gift giving and shopping. Juggling lists and expectations with what seems right for each family mem-

ber in light of available funds is a daunting, exhausting task, a job, a chore. It is not getting easier as the years pass. And then everything needs to be gift wrapped. Oh my, I forgot the tree (if only!) Select, set up, add lights, decorate, water regularly; three weeks later, do the whole process in reverse, replacing “select” with vacuum the mess. I’ve never said “Bah, humbug,” but I’ll confess to thinking it a few times. Surely I am not the only woman who has ever entertained these thoughts?

Don’t get me wrong, I love Jesus. A lot. I just think Christmas is overrated. I do want to celebrate Jesus, but not like this. I want to travel to Bethlehem but I keep getting tangled in the lights. I want to kneel in quiet wonder at the manger where God waits, to be still and know that He is God, but I get sidetracked, rushing around in my chaotic overscheduled life. How far is it to Bethlehem? Some days it seems like a long, long way from here.

Maybe it’s because my family looks much different now than it did five years ago when three sons gathered daily around the table, with extra friends and foster sons added for good measure. They agonized over the catalogs, happily selected, cut and decorated the tree, raced around lighting the window candles, reverently set up the manger scenes, swooned over the packages under the tree. Sometimes that seems like another life; did I make it up? Oldest Son has long since moved away, finished college, and recently married. We are entering our third Christmas with Middle Son on another continent, and Oldest Foster Son recently made an offer on a house several hours away. We’re growing accustomed to our little

family of three, yet there is the pain of separation. Of course, Youngest, age 9, anticipates Christmas with all the gusto he brings to the rest of life, and yet, something in my heart just cringes when I see December looming on the calendar. Do we really have to do all this again? Couldn’t we just repeat November and then sled directly to January? (Do not pass Christmas; do not shell out two hundred dollars.) When I think of the question “How far is it to Bethlehem,” not only am I not sure if I can get there from here – I’m not sure I want to!

And I know I am not the only one pondering whether it’s possible to make the journey to Bethlehem. I am surrounded by people in pain, friends touched by divorce, death, disease, disappointment. Although my pain is real to me, next to their deep wounds, my complaints fade to silence. When the topic of Christmas comes up, they fret

and sigh. They blink and look away. Long discussions about relationships and treatment schedules and visitation cloud any vision of a “Merry Christmas” (or a Happy New Year.) I try to find words for their questions, questions that are, in some way, my questions too.

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♥ What is to become of this pain at Christmas? Does it get put away in the attic when I bring down the decorations?

♥ Does the agony of grief set up a roadblock to Bethlehem?

♥ Must the manger be kept untouched by anything but



Brenda says, “This candle view is one of the more peaceful images of Christmas for me.”

quiet
delight or effervescent
happiness?

♥ Will tears of isolation wash out the road to Bethlehem?

♥ If my body
if filled with disease,

should I just stay home and forget the trip?

♥ If I must walk slowly to see the infant king because my feet shuffle and stumble where once they could’ve jumped and danced for joy, is Bethlehem too far?

♥ Must I take an alternate route with a heavier load limit, bypassing Bethlehem, if my heart is weighed down

EVERY ACTIVITY SEEMS TO BE
WRAPPED NOT IN SWADDLING
CLOTHES BUT IN COOKIE DOUGH.

with the pain of disappointment, unfulfilled hopes, and broken dreams?

No. I know the answer is no, no, no. No to staying away from Bethlehem because of imposed trappings that camouflage the baby. No to hiding our true selves behind cheery season's greetings. No to trying to pack up the pain in the Christmas storage totes. No to avoiding the manger as if the infant needs to be sheltered from difficulties. No, no, no. For this is why He came, this is why I, why you, must go to Bethlehem.

But there is more, much much more. For, oh, joy!!, when I simply cannot get there from here, when I am too burdened or weary or uncertain to go to Bethlehem, I experience Christmas in all its wonder because Jesus comes to me! That's the whole point. It is why He came, to be with us, to meet us in our world. If we could get to Him from here, His journey would be pointless. He came to be with me right in the middle of my messy life. Emmanuel, God with us. God with me! No qualification, no exclusion clauses. God with us. Emmanuel.

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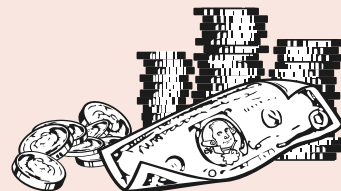
The M&M guy is on Brenda's favorite holiday/crazyday T-shirt, which she inherited from her son Joseph.

Brenda Zook writes from Belleville, PA where she shares life with Max and James. They are hoping to get to Bethlehem this Christmas (figuratively speaking), which may or may not involve icicle lights on their Hickory Lane house.

Uncommon \$ense

The \$322 Cost of Listening to God

by Keith Scheffel



I have a confession to make. I was recently angry at God. About a year ago, I started transforming part of our basement into a family room (a project that continues to move along at a snail's pace today). Some time before I started my project I heard of a friend who obtained a building permit to finish his basement. I remember thinking, "Why would you do a crazy thing like that? It's your basement – just finish it and let the county keep its nose (and increased tax fingers) out of your business!"

Fast forward a few months after I started our project (without a building permit of course), when I happened to read an article on Christians and integrity. I honestly don't remember much of the article other than a side comment that Christians should do things like construction projects with integrity (building permits were specifically mentioned). That unleashed an internal battle within me over the next several days, as the Holy Spirit began relentlessly nudging me with the thought that if I was going to be a person of integrity, I needed to obtain a building permit. That was not a welcome thought. I envisioned pain on several fronts: the cost of a permit, making sure I did everything in a manner that would be approved by a picky inspector, and the eventual increase in our real estate taxes. I'll spare you the details of the internal battle, but it will suffice to say that God won.

I went to apply for the permit and was shocked to find that it was going to cost me an outrageous \$190! After writing the check the clerk said, "Oh I'm sorry, I see you're doing some electric, too, you'll need a \$66 permit for that." So I wrote out another check. "Oh, I'm sorry, I see you're installing a gas fireplace; you'll also need a \$66 HVAC permit." Aargh!! It was getting so painful all I could do was laugh.

I was a bit hesitant to be candid in this column for several reasons. For one, it may thrust some "permit-less" readers into a quandary (I don't want to cost you money!). Or other readers may think, "What a dupe – you conscience-sensitive pansy!" And it might give everyone the impression that I'm always a strict law-abider (don't be fooled, I'll confess to pushing the speed limit and setting off fireworks without a permit).

So am I glad I paid \$322 to obtain my permits? No and yes. The "no" part of me is still a bit annoyed that God "fingered" me on this particular issue at an initial cost of \$322 (with increased taxes to follow). But the "yes" part of me is glad I was able to respond in a way that will increase my sensitivity to God's leading in the future as opposed to making me more calloused. And from that perspective it definitely was worth a measly \$322.

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