



MERRY CHRISTMAS

AROUND *the* FIRE

Winter 2018

RESCUE *the Equine* ★ MENTOR *the Child* ★ HOPE *for the Family* ★ EMPOWER *the Ministry*



# BEYOND BETHLEHEM

*By Sarah Robinett*

*"No Jesus, please . . . no. Not today . . ."* my silent prayer choked before my King.

The dark clouds above mirrored the sense of dread I felt in my spirit. I had been home less than three days and my return flight to Oregon was mere hours from departing. In my mind, this was no time for the tragedy unfolding before me.

Our old family horse, Mitzy, was having a hard time standing. After several hours, I knew the inevitable. A horse's legs and feet are a crucial part of their circulatory system. When a horse cannot stand to their feet, their circulation begins to shut down, thereby cutting off blood flow to their vital organs. Already Mitzy's hind legs were swollen, inflamed from the loss of blood and her body temperature had dropped. Though it was not cold outside, and our other horses stood comfortably munching their hay, she shivered helplessly in the drizzling rain.

My prayers for her healing felt as if they rose only to collide with the storm above my head and fall back down with the rain. Kindness could only dictate the ending of her suffering . . . by the ending of her life.

A whole lifetime flashed before my eyes. I remembered my three-year-old self praying for Jesus to give me a horse, a prayer I repeated almost daily for ten years. At the age of 13, He answered—with Mitzy. My siblings and I would line up three at a time on her back and spend all day riding out in the woods and fields surrounding our farm. She was my secret friend for every heartache. Through her, God spoke the calling He had on my life.

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One of the first times I shared what Jesus had done for me was while I led another little girl around on Mitzy's back. In that moment, with my fiery-red friend following my every step, I knew what I wanted to do with my life: *share Jesus through horses*.

Pulled back to the strangling grasp of the present, tears ran freely down my face. I thanked Mitzy for all she had done for me. I told her how God had used her to transform my life. Finally, I said . . . *goodbye*.

A few hours later, with more heart-wrenching goodbyes to my family, I boarded a plane back to Crystal Peaks.

Though peace flooded my heart that Mitzy's time and life were full and complete, my heart struggled and hurt deeply for the following days. I fought the continual mental replays of my friend's final moments. I silently prayed, "*Why? God, I trust You, but why?*"

Back at the ranch, one of my consistent kiddos was scheduled for a session. (You may remember "Samantha," in the summer edition of our newsletter.) Samantha dearly loved Bethlehem, our newest beautiful white-coated Arabian horse. The mare came to us after she was rescued by a family who could no longer keep her. Samantha—who had also been shuffled from foster home to foster home—had a special understanding and compassion for Bethlehem's story.

Throughout the summer, each time Samantha came to the ranch, she chose to work with Bethlehem. We spent much time together rubbing the mare *all* over. Our combined goal was to help her overcome her uncertainty of fly spray, pool noodles and gain confidence with a child guiding her. With each additional session, we could physically see Bethlehem relax. Her response to Samantha and I seemed to say, "Hey... they really *do* love me." By the time autumn rolled around, Samantha was riding Bethlehem off line and jousting with pool noodles. It was evident to any observer that both rider and horse trusted and loved each other deeply.

One day, Samantha seemed abnormally sad. Finally, she confided that she might be moving out of state. Another court hearing would soon dictate if she would leave to go live with extended family. I let the weight of her emotional words fill the silence that followed. Breaking the stillness, she explained that she had extended family who wanted to adopt her.

Turning to face her fully, I ventured, "Do you want to go?" Her quiet reply was, "Yes, but I'll miss Bethlehem."

Samantha found herself caught between the impossible paradox of finally having a family and home . . . and losing one of the only fragments of loving stability she'd ever known.

During her final session at the ranch, Samantha wanted to continue to help "train" Bethlehem one last time. After carefully brushing and saddling our four-legged friend, together we led Bethlehem into the large riding arena. I bent down on one knee in the middle of the arena and watched horse and rider make gentle laps around me. I felt it was important to simply allow them to have time together. As Bethlehem trotted around the arena, dust rose in the late afternoon light and created an ethereal glow that surrounded us all.

Still held within the beauty of the moment, my heart felt another wave of pain at the thought of losing my own special four-footed mentor. Samantha's bond with Bethlehem was similar to the bond I had with Mitzy, the beloved mare I'd just lost. When the two of them turned inward and came toward me, I could see Samantha's face set in resolve to have fun, but also streaked with wayward tears.

Still kneeling on the floor of the arena, rays of light pierced the dust and the voice of God pierced the cloud of sadness shrouding my own heart: "*Sarah, this is why. THIS is why I allowed you to experience everything that happened last week, so that you could know what Samantha is experiencing this week. Like you, she too, is having to say goodbye to her best friend.*"

Fresh tears welled in my eyes as I suddenly understood. Indeed—my earlier prayers *didn't* stop at the clouds—they reached the heart of my Father and moved Him on behalf of another little girl who was encountering similar pain. Rising to my feet, I called Samantha over. Awkwardly, I began, "Hey, I haven't really shared this event with anyone, but I feel like I'm supposed to share it with you. Last weekend while I was visiting my family, I also had to say goodbye to my best friend. I know it's really hard . . . and it's okay to feel sad. Sometimes it hurts so deeply because what you're losing is *real*. Likewise, God *really* used Bethlehem in your life. You two *really* are friends. What's cool about knowing Jesus is that, while 'goodbyes' may *really* hurt—in HIM—they're ultimately only 'see ya later.' He gives us *real* hope in our pain."



Photos by Sarah Robinette

Samantha listened while tears fell freely down her face. In that moment, I noticed Bethlehem's hand-stamped, metal nametag on her bridle.

With care, I unfastened it. Gently, I placed it in Samantha's hand. "Here . . . you should keep this."

Through her streaming tears, a slight smile lifted the corners of her lips. With their time together coming to a close, a girl and her best friend made a few more laps around the arena. When we finally released Bethlehem back into the paddock, Samantha turned toward me and sobbed into my arms. And, I understood.

God *never* wastes our pain.

In the days since, I've thought much about these encounters. Jesus also had to say "goodbye" to His Bethlehem where angels, wise men, and shepherds welcomed Him in awe and adoration. And what was beyond Bethlehem? The cross. The cross at Golgotha, where not even His own Father could look upon Him.

Perhaps this season is a time where your Bethlehem has also been replaced by Golgotha—the place of the skull—the place of unbearable pain. Perhaps instead of bearing and receiving gifts of merriment, you're bearing a cross of suffering and shame. Friend, understand this, Jesus knows *every* painful step of your journey.



*"And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."* Hebrews 12:1b-3 (NIV)

Also, let us never forget that Jesus didn't stop at the cross—and *neither should we*.

He rose to sit at the right hand of the throne of God—and so will we. Jesus offers His hope in every painful circumstance we will ever face.

While preparing to go to her new home, Samantha took the time to contact me. "I know what I'm going to do with Bethlehem's nametag," she said quietly. "I'm going to make a necklace so I can always keep her memory close."

I smiled. Like her, I want to take all the precious memories of God's gift in my little horse and wear them close to my heart as a perpetual reminder of His faithfulness. The faithfulness of my Heavenly Father in the past—is a reminder to me—of His hope to come.

Dear Friends, today, don't grow weary and lose heart. Hope is coming. Though you may currently be experiencing the 'cross beyond Bethlehem'—remember that home—the very heart and home of God for *you*—is *just* beyond the cross.

**"DON'T LET YOUR HEARTS  
BE TROUBLED. TRUST IN GOD,  
AND TRUST ALSO IN ME.  
THERE IS MORE THAN ENOUGH  
ROOM IN MY FATHER'S HOME.  
IF THIS WERE NOT SO,  
WOULD I HAVE TOLD YOU  
THAT I AM GOING TO PREPARE A  
PLACE FOR YOU?  
WHEN EVERYTHING IS READY,  
I WILL COME AND GET YOU, SO  
THAT YOU WILL ALWAYS  
BE WITH ME WHERE I AM."  
JOHN 14:1-3 (NLT)**

# JOY IN THE PRESENT

BY ANN HAWLEY

I love Christmas.

The entire Christmas season has always held a special place in my heart. I love the anticipation of snow quietly falling—creating a soft, sparkling blanket on a crisp winter morning. I enjoy the aroma of hot apple cider simmering on the stove, and reading heartfelt messages sent from family and friends nearby and far away. I delight in the Christmas tree glowing with soft lights and a lifetime of collected ornaments (with memories attached to each one). But most importantly, I'm filled with the joy of celebrating the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

*"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."* Isaiah 9: 6 (NIV).

Author and Holocaust survivor, Corrie ten Boom, once said: "Who can add to Christmas? The perfect motive is that God so loved the world. The perfect gift is that He gave His only Son. The only requirement is to believe in Him. The reward of faith is that you shall have everlasting life."

Admittedly, the commercialization of Christmas can often make the season difficult for some to bear. Many folks grudgingly endure the barrage of endless advertisements and the hectic pace of the season in an attempt to get to the other side of December 25th. I, however, am the Norman Rockwell-loving idealist who can't wait for the Christmas season to begin. As a child, I would mark giant X's through each day on my calendar that led up to December—as if they were hurdles to get through before the true joy of the Christmas season could begin.

My father was like a kid at Christmas. Although he spent the majority of his childhood in abject poverty during the Great Depression, he made up for those early years with his joy and exuberance for the holidays as an adult. When I was growing up, he and I would wait in hopeful anticipation for the Christmas season to arrive. It was all we could do to get through harvest festivals, family gatherings, and Thanksgiving—so focused were we on the upcoming beauty of Christmas.

I have a vivid memory of my sweet mama walking into my room one day as I was busily marking a large X on my calendar through yet another day leading up to December. With her arm around my shoulder and a kiss on top of my head, she lovingly admonished: "Be careful baby – don't wish your life away." My mom was a big fan of living in the moment.

Each and every morning when she woke me up for school, she would throw open my shutters and exclaim, *"This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."* Psalm 118:24 (ESV).

As life is prone to do, it has taken me on a perspective-altering journey. I have known suffering and grief and I have shouldered alongside friends and family members in the midst of their heartache. In an example of love that ultimately came full circle, I became the primary caregiver for my beloved parents, who both developed Alzheimer's in their later years.

This role was equally rewarding and frustrating—fulfilling and terrifying—soul-satisfying and exhausting. Their memories of the past were rapidly fading and they didn't have the ability to anticipate the future.

What they had was the present. There was no looking forward. And in light of that fact, there was a very real possibility that they wouldn't be here for another Christmas, the *present* became my focus.

I could either choose to worry about what tomorrow would bring—or I could make each day a gift. My folks could appreciate and fully embrace whatever was happening in the moment. The Lord quickly showed me that my job was to look for joy. Every day could be Christmas if I truly focused on Jesus' presence instead of my frustration, exhaustion, and sorrow. I prayed for a daily dose of the Holy Spirit's guidance to lead me through each day—each hour—each minute. The author, Ann Voskamp, writes: "His presence is always the gift you don't know you need the most—until you're in the most need."

Today, with my parents in Heaven, I start each day praying for the covering

of the Holy Spirit to direct my path and to allow me to see joy in the present; in spite of how I happen to be feeling or my current circumstances. I'm not always successful but I'm always trying.

"WITH HER ARM  
AROUND MY SHOULDER  
AND A KISS ON TOP OF  
MY HEAD, SHE LOVINGLY  
ADMONISHED:  
'BE CAREFUL BABY, DON'T  
WISH YOUR LIFE AWAY!'  
MY MOM WAS A BIG FAN OF  
LIVING IN THE MOMENT."

Recently, I was working with a group of volunteers at the Ranch and the topic of anticipation came up. Several of the volunteers were planning to attend a local concert that they were looking forward to. Another one had made an offer on a house and was eagerly anticipating a response from her realtor. A middle-aged couple who were volunteering together reflected on some mental health issues that

one of their children had been going through, and they were anxiously anticipating an upcoming visit with a new therapist. Within all the declarations of reflection and anticipation, one volunteer remained silent and continued to weed the rows of blueberries we were working on. Attempting to include her in the conversation, I asked her, "Stacy, what are you looking forward to?" She paused and stopped weeding, and then she plucked a ripe blueberry off one of the bushes. She smiled and said, "I'm looking forward to eating this blueberry!"

We all laughed, but truly, what a heart that was focused on the present!

*"Forget the former things; do not dwell in the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."* Isaiah 43:18-19 (NIV).

I'm certainly not making a case for never looking forward to anything, or not planning for the future. But what I've learned is that while forward-thinking can be a positive and necessary experience and reflecting back can inform who we are and equip us for wherever the Lord leads us . . . *the place where Jesus consistently meets us is in the present.* To the degree that the future is uncertain for each of us and the past can't be altered, there doesn't seem to be much point in dwelling in either place if it steals the joy from today.

*"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."* Matthew 6:34 (NIV).

Every morning as I walk up the Ranch driveway on my way to work, I admire the innocence of our horse herd. They're completely satisfied to nuzzle children who reach through the fence to pet them, without any thought of upcoming events or concerns. They aren't thinking about the weather or which child will ride them later. They're simply content to enjoy the moment they're in. Our horses are literally object lessons for finding joy in the present.

I still savor the Christmas season, but I no longer wish for time to speed up so it can arrive. Mother Teresa once said, "It's Christmas every time you let God love others through you." Christmas is the ultimate example of pausing to soak in the present and giving thanks for the hope that only Jesus Christ can provide. As we recognize the birth of our Savior, Emmanuel, let's celebrate His gift of hope and truly find the joy of *His presence* in the present.

All stories written in "Around the Fire" newsletter are true. Some of the names have been changed to protect individual privacy. "Around the Fire" newsletter stands on the Word of God. Multiple translations of the Holy Bible are used to assure clarity for our readership. Each author is afforded the right to choose the translation that best suits their submission.

# If My People

BY TROY MEEDER

*“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”*

2 Chronicles 7:14 (NLT).

This remains as a powerful promise from the great “I Am.” I’ve often returned to this relevant reminder of the goodness of our God. When looking for solace in times of struggle, God’s Word reminds us that it’s from HIM that we find forgiveness of sin and experience the healing that our land so desperately desires. I confess that I’ve taken for granted the context of where this compelling response from God—to His people—finds its genesis.

Solomon was now the earthly King over God’s people. His father, David, was no longer on the throne. Solomon was now ushering in the greatest age of the Jewish nation ever recorded. With the temple finished, Solomon dedicated to God the powerful physical expression of His people’s adoration in return. For seven days, the nation worshiped and prayed. Solomon then sacrificed 142,000 cattle, sheep and goats as an atonement for sin and an expression of worship. Solomon set the stage for God’s Presence.

In 2 Chronicles 7:12, after all this worship was finished, the Lord appeared to Solomon at night. He said, *“I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.”*

It’s a powerful truth that the God who created the universe would speak to a mere man. That simple line is an irrefutable reminder that God DOES speak to His people. We see this happen often in scripture when mankind chose to worship Him during their challenges. These men and women chose to magnify HIM instead of their challenging circumstances. Solomon chose to plow the hard ground of his own heart and led the people he was ruling toward the same personal commitment. The simple choice to adore God became the deep soil where His life changing words could find root and grow within.

Four simple commands from the Lord bring this astounding scripture to life. Four commands set the stage for Him to move in power over our hearts and land. Four commands—only four.

Command number one—“Humble yourself.” Genuine humility is the hallmark of the Believer. “If my people will humble themselves.” True humility resides in the heart of the Believer who sees themselves through the eyes of the Living God—not through the veil of their brokenness—not through the world’s judgement of worthless—not through the black shroud of past sin. Real humility grows deep within the hearts of those whose eyes are no longer fixed on self but Jesus. It’s only through His eyes that we truly see ourselves as He sees us. Humble yourself.

Command number two—“Pray.” If we would purposely shut down our phones and turn off the noisy electronics of this world and simply talk to our Jesus, everything would change. For most, prayer doesn’t happen effectively within the quiet of the mind, it’s too easy to be swept away by our own thoughts and attempt to solve our challenges through the sources we understand. The AUDIBLE prayer of saints changes everything because it challenges us to set aside our pride, give up our need for control . . . and simply pursue the will of our Creator. Pray.

Command number three—“Seek my face.” Why? Because we become what we behold. The Bible says in Matthew 6:33 to “Seek first the kingdom of God.” What are your eyes fixed on? A new car? A new house? Maybe a girl or a boy? Perhaps intentionality in a relationship? One of the greatest dangers of our society is that our eyes are fixed on—ourselves. The truth is, we only have two places where our full focus can rest—us—or Him. It would be easy to write for hours of the “me-centric” sickness that’s consuming healthy relationships, healthy self-esteem, healthy relational balance and a genuine pursuit of our God. Simple question, are your eyes fixed on you . . . or Jesus? Seek Him.



Photo by Benjamin Edwards

Command number 4—“Turn from their wicked ways.” Pretty clear . . . turn AWAY from our sin and TOWARD our God. It’s true that we have a sin nature within us; Adam infused sin in all our DNA. Even with that said, sin is still a choice. Indeed, temptation is all around us but we can choose to either move past it or bite the hook. Personal purity is so beautiful and precious to God. Think about it, the first name of the Holy Spirit is . . . HOLY. Because of this fact, instead of asking God to fix this, heal that, show up here, help me there—while CHOOSING to still engage in sin—we need to bring our sin before Him, ask for His forgiveness, and then CHANGE direction. This is how we become that pure vessel where the Holy Spirit chooses to reside. Ask yourself: what am I watching on TV? What movies do I choose to see? What websites do I visit? Does my speech glorify God? Am I bitter? Do I slander, gossip or hide my criticism behind sarcasm? Not one of us is without sin—but ALL of us can choose to pursue a life hallmarked by purity. All of us can choose to turn away from our ugly junk and turn toward the glory of our King.

Solomon heard the voice of Almighty God only when he humbled himself, prayed, looked for God and purified himself before his Maker.

When it comes to personal healing, because of the all-consuming love of our God, the answer is simple—**humble—pray—seek—turn.**

Let’s learn and grow from our history as His people. May this season of wonder not only be filled with the joy of gatherings, food, lights, gifts and time together, but with the true reason we celebrate—Jesus. Like the nation of Israel did in Solomon’s day, may we revel in the adoration, joy, power and life that is found in the love of Jesus. He is the Son of the living God who came to earth to restore our personal relationship with the One who has given each of us life—and that dear friend—is something to celebrate.

*Merry Christmas,  
Troy and Kim*

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## CRYSTAL PEAKS YOUTH RANCH 2019 Calendars

It's our joy to share with you—our extended Ranch family—the essence of what the Lord has been doing at Crystal Peaks this past year. This poignant calendar captures “God breathed” moments within the lives of our kids, volunteers and staff. Each month features a Ranch photograph paired with children's quotes and encouraging Bible verses.

As *our gift to you*, we'd like to give each household one *free* calendar. We pray the Lord will use it to bless and encourage all who see it.

To order a calendar, please go to our website at [www.cpyr.org](http://www.cpyr.org) and click on “Ranch Life,” on our home page. Or, you can mail in your request to: Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch, 19344 Innes Market Rd., Bend, OR 97703.

If you wish, additional calendars can be ordered as well. To help offset the cost of any extra calendars, donations are greatly appreciated. Production of each calendar is approximately \$7. These added calendars can also be ordered through our website or mail. All international orders outside the US and Canada will be required to pay a \$5 shipping fee.

We've been so greatly blessed by the kids, families and horses who come to our Ranch. Again, thank you so much for shouldering with us in this ministry of hope.

