

When Not to Check Out

There was nothing quite as relaxing as Christmas break when I was a college student. I can remember how completely free I felt during the holidays with no schoolwork hanging over my head. Because fall classes were finished and spring semester had not yet begun, there were no pending exams, no papers waiting to be written, and no classes to set the alarm for. This was the two week span of time that I anticipated more than any other. On top of having very little responsibility during Christmas break, there was the added bonus of being able to enjoy the holiday festivities while in my freed mental state. Delicious food, hometown friends, gifts, music, family, skiing, and snowmobiling were some of the things I looked forward to with great excitement.

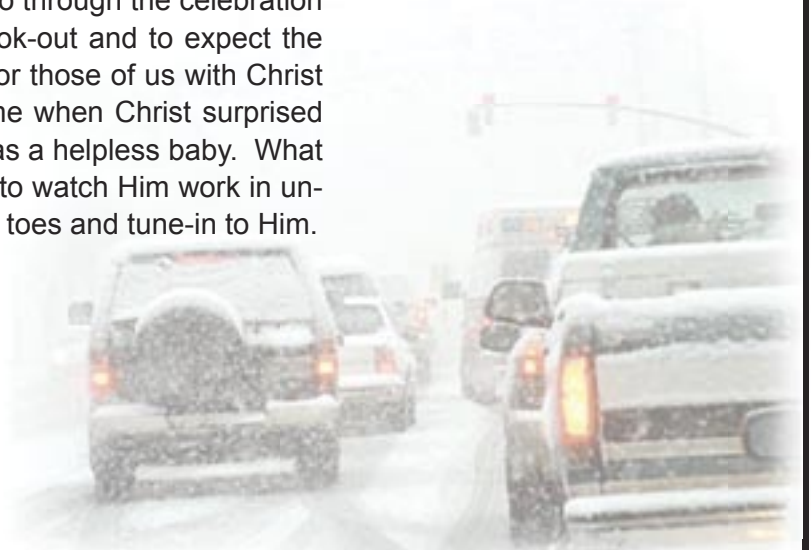
One particular year stands out in my mind as I think back to this time in my life. That year I finished my last final exam, rushed to my dorm, packed my things, loaded the car and drove off campus. It was a picture perfect night. There were snow flurries in the air, neighborhoods were lit up with lights, and I had Christmas carols playing in the car. The magical Christmas season had arrived for me. I headed north towards my hometown of Cambridge full of anticipation. As cruise control took me down the road, for some reason my mind relaxed just a bit too much. Traffic slowed considerably without my realizing it, and as I headed under a bridge, my car slipped in the snow and firmly rear-ended the station wagon in front of me. Yikes! That wasn't part of my usual Christmas celebration.

The accident turned out to be a minor one, but as telephone calls to the insurance agent, trips to the body shop, and deductible payments altered my Christmas that year, I was gently reminded how dangerous it is to mentally relax at Christmas and expect to follow the same old routine. My little mishap that year helps me to remember not to mentally check out as I "cruise" into the holidays and go through the celebration routine. Christmas is a time to be on the look-out and to expect the unexpected. This should be especially true for those of us with Christ in our lives. Christmas, after all, was the time when Christ surprised mankind by unexpectedly entering the world as a helpless baby. What a wonderful opportunity we have this season to watch Him work in unexpected ways if we remember to stay on our toes and tune-in to Him.

Erika Garica



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And A Sword Will Pierce Your Own Side....

It was Christmas in Hong Kong, 1972. Our family of three had arrived that August for our first term as missionaries, sent by the Evangelical Free Church of America, fulfilling our childhood dreams and desires to serve God overseas someday.

On October 10th, our second son, Matthew Lloyd had arrived unexpectedly, 21/2 months ahead of schedule, adding to the stress of learning a new language and culture. Despite the prayers of our fellow missionaries, family and friends back home, and our new Chinese friends, Matthew died 6 weeks later, after an up and down struggle that had left us exhausted and confused.

Now I found it especially hard to sing songs about "Baby" Jesus and focus on celebrating the birth of God's only son. "What about my son?" I wanted to shout to the crush of people all around in that city of 41/2 million. Of course, many of those nameless faces had no idea who baby Jesus really was. That's why we were there to tell them. In my grief I began to think about Mary. As prophesied by Simeon, a sword would pierce her soul in the future. Did she ponder that as she held her baby Jesus? I was deeply touched by his vulnerability as a human infant. And God was patiently whispering to me that he had watched his only son die too. But I was not as willing to give up my own son. It just didn't seem fair. We had worked so hard to be here and now this. And so I grieved that Christmas.

Thirty four years later, I read in Romans 8:32 that *"He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all-how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things."* God graciously gave us a daughter 10 months after Matthew's death and another son and daughter, through adoption 10 years later, and now he has brought me the joy of five grandchildren. He also taught me to trust him in all circumstances.

I still think about Matthew on his birthday and at Christmas. I cry along with those who have lost children and are feeling sad at this time of year, but not as one who has no hope. Even back in 1972, I knew with full assurance that I would see my baby again in heaven. I can hardly wait!

Life is full of pain, and tragedy is no respecter of holidays, but God is there in the midst of it all, wanting to comfort and grow us and be involved in the drama of our lives. "The Lord is close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in Spirit." Psalm 34:18.

In His human frailty I suppose Jesus could have been born prematurely, as my son was. But what amazes me most is the Father's willingness to send him. Thank you God for understanding.

Karin Olson



**Karin with Matthew
in Hong kong, 1972**



**Grandma Karin
granddaughter Laura
& baby doll.**