

Christmas 2018

Dear Family and Friends:

Meisha's my guy. Meisha was an orphan child in Russia back in the 1990s, shortly after the Berlin wall came down and the old Soviet Union collapsed. Two believers were invited to teach abandoned and abused children at a government-run orphanage. At one teaching session, they told the traditional Christmas story to more than one hundred boys and girls who sat in rapt attention. The children had never heard this before. When the teachers had finished telling the story, they gave the children materials and invited them to make a model for the manger.

As the teachers walked around the class to assist with the assignment, they noticed that 6-year-old Meisha had placed not one, but two, babies in his manger. They asked him why. The little guy meticulously repeated the story, detail by detail, with amazing accuracy. He had listened very intently. When Mary laid the baby Jesus in the manger, Meisha said that Jesus had asked him if he had a place to stay. When he told Jesus he had no home or parents, Jesus said that he could stay with him in the manger. But Meisha had no gift to give to baby Jesus like all the other people. However, he thought maybe he could help Jesus stay warm. Would that be enough of a gift? Jesus replied that would be the best present anyone could give and invited him into the manger to be with him always. At that point in the tale, the little boy burst into tears, sobbing uncontrollably. He had found someone who would not abandon him, someone who would stay with him through thick and thin. Attaching his life to the life of the Lord Jesus, he had found deliverance from a very bleak existence.

I do not know where Meisha is today, neither his physical location nor where he is on his faith journey. His story highlights one of the ironies of Christmas. Our Christmas celebrations emphasize home and family, love and belonging, and all the warmth of inclusion. Yet, the Holy Family was anything but warmly welcomed and included. There was a rawness and a harshness about that first Christmas. When Jesus was born there was no room for him in human abodes. Devout Jewish individuals faced governmental oppression during that period. The Emperor Augustus was flexing his political muscles to ensure that the Roman tax base was secure and definitively tied to ancient ancestry (for tracking purposes). He did not make things convenient either. All the Jewish people were on the road to their hometowns at a challenging time of year. Joseph and Mary faced relentless demand, unwanted travel while nine months pregnant, being uninvited visitors, refused even rudimentary accommodation, and unwarranted financial hardship during that first Yuletide. The Lord's birth cries did not come from a welcoming place where chestnuts roasted on an open fire.

Yet here was God incarnate visiting his planet unawares and a little boy, hearing this story, instinctively realizes that home is where Jesus is. An animal shelter or a cave on a chilly evening is an abode warm enough with such esteemed and blessed company. And the lad intuitively realizes that the gift the Lord wants is the little boy himself.

Meisha had a honing device for home and implicitly realized that it was connected to a person. For others like Meisha, Christmas is not a season of warmth and pleasant circumstances, but of hard

memories that linger and rob them of peace and any sense of well-being. Those include failed and hostile relationships, broken promises, memories of family rifts, unfulfilled hopes, recurring fears, sad moments, words that are regretted, and the memory of those loved ones that are no longer with them. All these can spin a cold overture of alienation even amid a call to embrace the Prince of Peace.

So where is God in all this? Right where he has always been—in the middle of it all. Emmanuel, God with us, visited his creation to suffer with it, to redeem it, and to call us back from our wayward choices. Home, regardless of circumstance, starts with Him. Meisha's childlike faith de-romanticized the niceness of Christmas and drew him to embrace God's provision for what he lacked. That is our wish for ourselves and each of you this Yuletide—that each of us would learn to live hopefully into our need for God this season and throughout the upcoming year.

From our home to yours: Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.