



## A Christmas Lesson

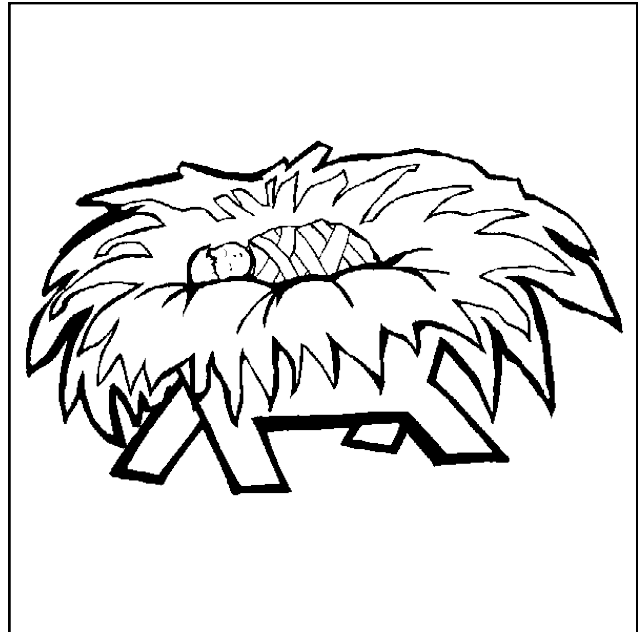
By Rosemary Gregory

As Christmas approaches and you begin to hear the sounds and smell the smells of Christmas, how are you feeling? Where are your thoughts?

As an adult, around this time of the year I begin searching for that Advent wreath and the purple and pink candles, Then we have to get that tree up by Thanksgiving because we are having a Christmas party the following week for our neighbors. Oh, time to make a menu and send out those cards! I still haven't gone shopping for Christmas gifts! I am not going to even think about the bills! Did I send out my thank you cards, and oh, gotta get new sheets for the guest room 'cause Aunt Hilda and Uncle Ben are going to be here this year to celebrate Ashlyn's ninth birthday! Where is everyone going to sleep? Tension and confusion and lots of preparation— is this what Christmas is all about?

I remember simpler times in my life when all that mattered was whether or not I had been a good little girl so that Santa Claus would fill my stocking and bring me a gift, Oh, I knew it was Jesus' birthday and all, but I was rather single minded back then. We always had a manger scene to remind us of the Christ child; that was important to me and my family. We usually picked out our tree the week before Christmas (however, they were cheaper on Christmas Eve!) and Dad was in charge of that. He would keep the tree outside in a bucket until Christmas Eve; then all eight of us would take part in bringing the tree into the house and setting it up. Oh that wonderful smell of pine! That night we left cookies and milk out for Santa and willingly went to bed early so that Santa Claus could have plenty of time to decorate the tree. I didn't have any duties except to show up, And the next morning we all did. How wonderful to see the tree all lit up and decorated. . . and our stockings full, with gifts under the tree! Once everything settled down, we would get dressed for Mass,

When I grew up, things changed. The



magic of Christmas shifted from Santa Claus to shopping, wrapping, mailing, writing cards, cooking, cleaning, travelling, socializing, and decorating the whole house (every corner) with lights, tinsel, and that familiar smell of pine, along with the manger; I had to have the whole Christmas village, train and all, But even with all those pretty things, I now know that they were a distraction from the true joy of Christmas.

One Christmas in 1982, God placed me on an island where there were no distractions. Back then my husband, Jack, and I were stationed at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan. Because of Jack's position as public affairs officer, we got to know many of the people of Japan. Through an invitation by these Japanese officials, we arrived at Yakota Air Base (near Osaka, Japan) on December 12. We were going to have a private tour of the mainland and return to Okinawa on December 20. We flew on a C-130 to Yakota and caught a train to Tokyo, After touring there for three days, we took the "Bullet Train" to Kyoto, the former capital of Japan. Matsukawasan, a Japanese Air Force officer, met us. He was an excellent tour guide since he had been born in Kyoto and lived there.

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## Lost But Not Alone

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On December 18 we boarded another train, this time to Nara, which had been the capital of Japan for 1,000 years before Kyoto.

Our personal guide in Nara was Nakaisan, who loved showing off his American slang, like "hit the road," "apple of my eye," "that's about it," and "shape up or ship out." Nara has many deer which are protected by law. Therefore, they roam all over the city, a situation which was intimidating. Nakaisan explained that it is against the law to kill a deer: "That is how 'pass the buck' was started. If a dead deer is found in your yard, you passed it onto your neighbor's yard, or to the yard of your enemy," he said. So that Christmas, my son, Mark, got to see Santa's real reindeer, which didn't calm his fears. Our dream tour of Japan ended December 20.

This is when my Christmas story begins. The next eight days were quite an ordeal, Every day we tried to get a MAC flight out from Yakota AB to Kadena AB. Every day we awoke at 2:30 a.m. for a 3:30 a.m. call for a 5:30 a.m. flight. Every day we walked with our luggage (no taxis at that hour) to the terminal to hear our name called, but it was never called. One morning at 3 a.m. a young couple in a van stopped and gave the three of us a lift to the terminal. We were so appreciative, for in Japan, it is very cold in December!

Soon it was Christmas Eve. Mark and I

walked to the chapel for Mass. While walking back to the visiting officers' quarters, I heard a voice crying out, "Mrs. Gregory?" My goodness, I thought, who would know me here? The voice said, "Mrs. Gregory, I have something for you. Will you come here?" As I approached her van, I recognized it as the one we had ridden in a few days earlier.

"How did you know my name?" I asked.

"I saw your husband's name tag on his uniform," she answered. I still remember her name after all these 29 years: Mary Lynne Izzo. Her gift to me was a manger. "I thought you could use this tonight," she said. "When you are done with it, just leave it at the billeting office, My husband wanted to come, but he is on the flight line feeding the air-men working tonight."

This happened in 1982, 29 years ago, and I still get a lump in my throat reliving this moment, I was so cold, so alone, so lost, but not really. God had sent His angel. He wanted us to know He was there. So that Christmas Eve, my husband, son and I had a perfect Christmas, No gifts, no fancy decorations, no tree, no stereo, no computer, no cell phone. . . just each other and Jesus in His manger. What more did we need? Oh yes, we had a can of Spam!

Not to leave you in suspense, after the eighth day of rising at 2:30 a.m., we had had enough. We caught a plane to Nagasaki and made it home on Dec. 27 at 2 p.m., with a different perspective on what Christmas is really all about.

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