



A BUNDLE OF  
**THYME**  
*For Every Season*

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TIPS

## **In the Kitchen – December is Here! – by Marcy Lytle**

I can't believe it, we're in the last month of the year! And even though we're busy buying and wrapping, we still have to eat! These recipes we just had this last month, and they're keepers! Enjoy.

### Bundt Pan Nachos

I saw this on Instagram and tried it. I think I'd use a stouter chip next time, and be sure to drain all the ingredients well before layering in the pan! But it was easy and cool to make!

- Tortilla Chips
- 1 can black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 can corn, drained and rinsed
- 1 can rotel with green chiles, drained
- Colby Jack grated
- Ground meat, cooked, drained and seasoned.

Spray the bundt pan so it won't stick. Start with cheese on the bottom and then layer the chips, and the rest of the ingredients. Do this twice. Bake in the oven at 400 degrees for 10 minutes. Turn it over onto a plate, and serve with diced avocado and salsa. A tiny jar fits right in the hole, where you can place the avocado or guacamole.

### Vermont Maple Granola

You know I'm a fan of homemade granola, and this is a new recipe for me. It's easy, makes a lot, and is oh, so tasty.

Ingredients:

- 4 c old fashioned rolled oats
- 1 c shredded coconut, unsweetened (or sweetened)
- 1 c sunflower seeds
- 1 c pumpkin seeds
- 1 c slivered almonds
- 1 c pecans, roughly chopped
- 1 cup pure Vermont maple syrup (grade A dark color with robust taste is best)
- $\frac{1}{2}$  c extra virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt
- 1 c sweetened dried cranberries

Preheat oven to 325. Combine oats, coconut, both seeds, almonds, pecans in a large bowl. Pour maple syrup and olive oil into bowl and mix thoroughly. Sprinkle with a generous pinch of salt, and pour mixture onto large baking sheet (I lined with parchment), creating a uniform layer.

Bake granola, stirring every 15-20 minutes til golden brown, about 1 hour. Let cool completely and sprinkle cranberries on top, and enjoy. (I add a few dark chocolate chips as well!)

## Raspberry Blueberry Crisp

I'm sure you've made a crisp before, but maybe you need a bright holiday-inspired red crisp for your guests this season! This one is so easy and yummy. Don't forget the ice cream!

### Ingredients:

- 3 c raspberries
- 1 c blueberries
- $\frac{1}{4}$  c maple sugar (I used brown sugar)
- 1 T lemon zest
- 2 T flour

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- $\frac{1}{2}$  c old fashioned rolled oats
- 3 T flour
- 1/3 c almonds
- 4 T maple sugar (used brown)
- $\frac{1}{2}$  t cinnamon
- Pinch salt
- 4 T Butter

Preheat oven to 375. Combine filling ingredients (first five) in bowl, and pour into a buttered 8" square or 9" round baking dish.

Combine oats, flour, almonds, sugar, cinnamon and salt in a bowl. Add the butter and combine ingredients into a crumbly mix of pea-sized pieces. Sprinkle the topping over the berry mix in an even layer.

Bake for about 45 min or until the crisp topping is browned. (Serve with ice cream!)

## A Side to Die For

This side dish was so delicious and easy to make, it will be a staple in my rotation of recipes for sure!

### Ingredients:

- 3 slices thick cut bacon, diced
- 6-8 medium carrots peeled, halved and cut into  $1\frac{1}{2}$  " pieces
- 1 lb Brussels (I got a bag of the shredded version) or you could trim and quarter
- 2 T pure Vermont Maple syrup (preferably Grade A dark robust)
- 1 t kosher salt

Place bacon in large pan over medium heat, stir periodically. Once bacon has rendered fat, add the carrots and cover, stirring or shaking pan occasionally. After 6-8 minutes, add brussels and cover stirring occasionally.

When the carrots are browned, and sprouts are soft and golden brown, drizzle in syrup and add the salt. Stir to combine.

### Easy Tasty Quesadilla

It's a little different than the norm, but it's also so tasty and simple.

Ingredients:

- $\frac{1}{2}$  lb boneless skinless chicken breast
- 1 t ground cumin
- $\frac{1}{4}$  t salt,  $\frac{1}{4}$  t pepper
- 2 T olive oil
- 1 medium white onion sliced
- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 2 T lime juice
- 8 8-inch flour tortillas
- 2 c shredded mozzarella cheese

Place the  $\frac{1}{2}$  lb chicken breast between plastic wrap or parchment, and pound to an even thickness. (I just bought the small breast tenders instead and skipped this step.) Season both sides of chicken with cumin, salt and pepper.

Heat 2 T olive oil over med-hi heat in a skillet. Swirl oil to coat pan, and place chicken in skillet. Cook about 5 min per side, or until chicken is 165 degrees internally. Set aside to rest 5 minutes before slicing or dicing.

Meanwhile, don't wipe out skillet and add the sliced onion, cooking over med-hi heat until soft and translucent, about 7 minutes or so, stirring often. Transfer onions to a bowl and add the cilantro and lime juice. Stir.

Heat a heavy pan (I used cast iron) to med heat. Assemble quesadilla with tortillas –  $\frac{1}{4}$  c cheese,  $\frac{1}{4}$  of onion mix, lay  $\frac{1}{4}$  chicken on top, and another  $\frac{1}{4}$  c cheese, and another tortilla. Assemble four of these.

Carefully slide into skillet and cook 2-3 min (spray with nonstick cooking spray) – flip and cook another 2-3 minutes till cheese melts. Serve immediately, after slicing into fourths.

Serve with sour cream, guacamole or salsa, too.

## **Seven for You – Shadow Lifters – by the Panel**

Holidays are busy, and sometimes the joy of the season is overshadowed by a number of things. Maybe it's sadness, or the weariness of the world, or even just the stress of it all. And before we know it, the holidays are over and we missed out on what all we intended to slow down and enjoy! We asked our panel of women to share what they do to lift these shadows, so that they actually enjoy the moments:

The holidays can be stressful with everything seeming darker than normal in the news these days, so I try to find ways to give. Christmas is about family, love, sharing, kindness, and giving back....it is not about the perfectly wrapped gift. I used to be stressed when I had little money to buy gifts. But there are other ways to celebrate His birth and the lessons he taught us. "Love one another as I have loved you." This message should be remembered all year.

This year, I am gathering food items to take to a food bank for those in need. This brings me joy.  
- Cathy

For me, Christmas is so fun, but with my active mind I often anticipate it being over before it ever arrives! I don't know what that is called, but that kind of thought process can certainly cast a shadow over the present joy of the season. I struggle with living in the moment.

Practically, I try to have a few things on the calendar in January to look forward to...when Christmas is over. This includes my husband's birthday celebration. But also, I really try to savor the moments throughout the season, like taking time to sip hot tea, observing the trees out the window, taking slow walks, and experiencing advent reading nightly. This year, we have the book *Darkness Then Light*, and I'm looking forward to that. Intentional slow moments where I contemplate His goodness helps me savor the moments instead of rushing through them. - Marcy

For many years, Mrs. Clause was the sole Christmas magic maker in the Mercer household. The Elves were little, and Mr. Clause thought Mrs. Clause enjoyed doing it all herself!

Three years ago, Mrs. Clause decided to voice her opinion in an unhealthy way by going on a Christmas-magic STRIKE. She just up and quit!

Mr. Clause and all the little Elves, who were, in fact, not so little anymore, suffered from shock, but then jumped into action! They had a Christmas-magic meeting and came up with a plan.

The new plan: Everyone chips in money according to their own budget, and then we split the pot evenly. We draw names. Each person is responsible for spending the money on the person they draw, plus one gift for each of the other people. They are responsible for the person's stocking, as well as wrapping their gifts. (Mrs. Clause \*particularly\* disdained the wrapping responsibilities.)

Now, Mrs. Clause is responsible for a fair portion of Christmas-magic! Mr. Clause and the Elves have decided they enjoy co-creating Christmas magic! Mrs. Clause is mostly full of Christmas magic again. She has one boundary left to set: decorating! She has decided that she will only decorate to the extent that it makes HER happy, not others happy. Life is a journey....Mrs. Clause is still learning how to live life to the fullest and be a healthy family member! – Laura

For me, Christmas and the celebration of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, has always been one of joy and love, but also one of complete exhaustion. We have many birthdays (including

mine) in December as well. What lifts my spirit during this beautiful season is to have a lot of candles throughout the house on timers so nighttime glows with warmth. This light at night lifts my tired heart and reminds me of the Light of the World who was born to save the world. So this year, I will slow down more and bask in the candlelight while remembering why we celebrate Christmas and thank Him for all He has done for me and my family. – Glenna

January and February are crazier than December in our family because we have five big birthdays in those two months. So, I'm always trying to think of gifts for that along with Christmas. I will say that a lot of the time, the after Christmas sales, when looking for birthday gifts, can lift my spirits. Or maybe it's just shopping and finding those gifts that gives me a feeling of accomplishment.

Another “shadow lifter,” as an older woman, includes reminiscing about the times my children were still at home. And I love looking at old photos. A few Christmases ago one of my son's and his wife gave me and my husband a PhotoShare Frame. It's a digital frame that displays your photos. It's easy to program photos from your phone and I have mine set on a slideshow. I have old pictures of our family before grandchildren and plenty of photos with the grandchildren. Sometimes, I just have to stop and look at the picture shown and think back. It always puts a smile on my face. – Carole

I don't really feel exhausted during the season. I did years ago when I was working, but now in retirement the holidays seem doable for me. I don't feel sadness that I can remember. There is always some level of grief over the present issues of this age, but it's not better or worse at Christmas that I can think of. I'm working on trying to live in the moment. While I do try to plan what I hope are some special moments, I have given up on the self-imposed expectation that it is my job to make Christmas magical for everyone. Whatever I do attempt, I want it to honor Christ. And I do hope to get to enjoy some of the special moments through the eyes of the children. I guess my goal is to plan well, execute well, and be as relaxed as possible during the process. - Shelley

As the saying goes, “*Christmas is a Magical Time of the Year.*” But as most of us know, it can also be a time of stress, feeling blue, and being very overwhelmed. It is so important to incorporate some *shadow lifters* into the Holiday Season.

In my younger day, I decorated to the hilt! Both inside and outside. I had over 40 holiday tablecloths, and 30 boxes of decorations. I love, love, love Christmas!

Now, life and the Holiday Season is more serene for me, but I still love all-things Christmas, I just rely more on outside sources to fulfill my festive cheer. We attend community holiday events. The hospital has a *Festival of Trees* where I can see beautiful, ornate trees. We attend local church's Christmas sing-alongs and cantatas, and live nativity scenes. [note that most of these are free-of-charge, if you're on a budget.]

I needed to decide what was most important to make Christmastime an enjoyable, yet relaxing time in my home. I realized that I needed to give up on some traditions: having a full-size tree and lots of decorations throughout the house, baking goodies non-stop during December, buying gifts for out-of-area extended family.

The traditions that I keep that are truly *shadow lifters* during the holiday season for me:

- Christmas lights. I hang several strings around my home – both color & white lights. There's just something soothing about sitting in a room with just Christmas lights on.
- Christmas music. I start playing Christmas music the day after Thanksgiving. I listen to all types; traditional (think Bing Crosby's *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*), classical, Christmas hymns, and yes, even Elvis Presley!
- Christmas movies. I confess; I'm not a Hallmark movies devotee, but I do like to watch some feel-good, warm fuzzy, Christmas movies during the holidays. Including the classics, made-for-TV, and . . . yes, *Die Hard!* (contrary to my husband, it *IS* a Christmas movie!!)
- Christmas devotional. Every year, I get a devotional book geared towards the Christmas season. Last year, I read *The Marvel and Miracle of Advent* by Lisa Harper and Christine Caine. It centers me in remembering the true meaning of the season.

**Merry Christmas!**

## Cousin Moms – Favorites – by Charissa and Kamrin

Favorites. No, not favorite kiddos. However, we did ask the Cousin Moms to share their favorite items that make their Christmas with their families special. Maybe it's homemade ornaments or heirlooms from grandparents, something so simple or amazingly elaborate. What are these things and why are they so noteworthy? After reading, share yours below as well!

### Kamrin

I wait until the weekend of Thanksgiving to decorate, because I want to enjoy the season of Thanksgiving first. I soak in the fall décor and pumpkins for a while! And after Thanksgiving, we go to a tree farm and get our tree, watch Christmas movies and pull out the décor!

A simple thing I love is the kids' ornaments they created, from church or school. Their handprint, a crafted and painted one, anything they made – these have created special memories. I love those small items on our tree.

Another set of ornaments we get while enjoying treats and coffee while out, shopping. These ornaments might come from Target or Walmart or Hobby Lobby. They represent each of us! It might be a favorite movie or animal, or food they love, or a travel ornament. And our tree is full of memories of who we are, as people. My daughter was into Frozen for three years! We also traveled to Colorado. In 2020 we built our house. The boys have sports ornaments like baseball and football. This makes the tree so fun. We can look back and talk about who we were and are. These will be great for me to have as well, when my kids are grown!

Finally, my stockings I love. I love a Christmas mantel, it's one of my favorites. We haven't had a fireplace for a few years, but now we do. And I'm not sure why I love them, but our stockings have our initials, and even our pets have a stocking. I'm really excited that we have a mantel this year with a whole new display. We have a tradition with the stockings – favorite candy, gift card and small gifts – and the dogs get a treat! It's such a pretty setting in our décor!

One bonus thing is that we have some advent pieces we've added the past few years. I'm excited to have a spot on our mantel to display these as well, when we talk about the holidays and the true meaning of Christmas, the joy and the love from Him into this season. Most of all, I love representing who we are, who and what we love, and what we value and cherish in our home.

One day I might have a picture-worthy tree of coordinated colors, but right now I love all the memories with ornaments and a star and handmade and storebought things that represent our family. I love simple and cozy, welcoming and warm!

### Charissa

The Christmas season is my favorite part of the year! On top of all the yummy food, the beautiful lights, the Christmas music & festivities, we get to celebrate the precious birth of Jesus. When it comes to decorating for Christmas, I am pretty minimal in my decor. The girls love to join in on the fun, help decorate the home and their rooms, and as a family we always join together to put up the Christmas tree and hang the ornaments. Everyone has their favorite pieces, with some that hold great meaning! A few of our favorite pieces are:

1. **The girls' special ornaments.** Every year (since they were born) each child has received an ornament that represents something big that happened that year for them, or an adventure we went on. It is fun to watch the girls' faces as they unwrap their

ornaments, reminiscing on that particular year, and finding a special place for it on the tree. Our hope is that one day, when they have a family of their own - they can treasure these pieces of their childhood and pass it down to their children!

2. **Grammy Lynne's Christmas quilt.** This is a special one for me, as my grandmother made it. I proudly display it on our couch, remembering how beautiful she made Christmas in her home!
3. **The Pink Ceramic Christmas tree.** I bought the girls' a special ceramic Christmas tree that has old-fashioned colorful lights. They love displaying this in their room every year - it lights up their space and makes it fun.
4. **Stockings.** My husband and I can remember picking out stockings for our first child, and we bought ones for ourselves that coordinated. Each child since, has had the same stocking (in a slightly different pattern), and I love seeing our names displayed on our mantel. A picture of the blessings God has given us!

I could continue with so many little items that hold meaning! Through all the decorations and the heirlooms, it helps point us to the true meaning of Christmas - Jesus Christ. May this season of yours be filled with the promise that only Jesus can provide - an eternal life with Him that started in a little manger in Bethlehem.

## **The Dressing – December Hues – by Marcy Lytle**

I love all of the Christmas colors, don't you? And it's fun to wear them in our accessories, the coats we put on, the tops we wear, or the bags we carry...and even our shoes! Hoping to share some holiday inspiration this month, as we get dressed up to enjoy the season!

Argyle Sweater – This is a classic, isn't it? I think you can find an argyle sweater every winter. I love this one, from Cider Clothing, a great online store. It's so cozy and dresses up jeans for a day out shopping or a family gathering.

A Blue Coat – I feel like we usually gravitate toward black or brown when it comes to coats. Have you considered blue? This one is from Amazon and I have enjoyed it all season. Blue goes with gold, red, black, green...well, just everything!

Brown jacket – A faux leather jacket is a fun item to have in your closet, and there are lots of brown choices out there this season! Wear it open or button it up, and you'll feel dressed to the nines for whatever is on your calendar this December.

Green sweater – This is another sweater from Cider Clothing and I just love the color and the V stripe, and it's so cute under or over, however you want to wear it. Green is my favorite color of the season.

Navy silk – I found this silk piece, actually a shirt dress, on clearance at Madewell over a year ago, and it's a staple. It dresses up everything. Wear it to a Christmas concert or a dinner out with friends, or with just him! It's so elegant...

Pink for Christmas? Why, yes! And this fun scarf is a great addition, rust and pink together. Pink is so pretty during the holidays, with jewelry, with scarves, under jackets and over button ups. Grab a pink sweater, if you dare...

Cozy pajamas – There's a line of clothing from Walmart that has the coziest pajamas and they're so affordable. They feel like a warm blanket, and they're so, so soft. Cozies are the best, by the fire, on Christmas morning.

Plaid – Another classic, and this sweater is a blue and red plaid from Cider Clothing. It's a favorite, oversized, and so pretty. It dresses up jeans for any occasion at all, and keeps you warm and smiling...that's all!

That red dress – Oh, my goodness. This is just a ribbed knit dress from Walmart, and it can be worn so many ways – even with sneakers for a dressed down look. Or add tights and boots and make reservations for a festive dinner out.

What's your favorite Christmas color to wear? Do tell...

## **Tried and True – Last Month’s Learning – by Marcy Lytle**

It’s December already, and so much learning has happened over the past month, that I’m excited to share with you! Feel free to comment at the end with something cool you’ve learned, as well!

Target has the prettiest Christmas cloth napkins, \$14.99 for a set of four – in case you want to elevate your table this season!

We just got a couple more Mixtiles printed from photos we took on vacation. Have you discovered Mixtiles yet? They’re fantastic and so easy to hang – no marks left on your walls, either!

Does your store have a nut grinder in the whole foods section? We love having our almonds ground up into butter – so delish – and then served with crispbreads!

Need a last minute gift? Trader Joe’s 5 Items or Less is a nice cookbook for that friend that needs simplicity and good food!

If your glasses hurt your nose, there are nose pads that offer comfort! Amazon sells them in packets, and they’re awesome to have – so your nose has no marks!

Need a good thriller to watch over the holidays? *Relay* was our favorite from the summer – with a twist you won’t see coming!

If you’re out shopping and need a fast food meal that’s not a burger, try the Chick-Fil-A crispy chicken salad with honey mustard. It’s a winner!

Need a stovetop potpourri going, to keep you in the holiday spirit? In a pot of water, add sliced orange, slices of apple, 2-3 cinnamon sticks, 1 T of whole cloves, and 1 t of vanilla. Bring to a boil and then simmer. (Be sure to watch the pot and keep water in it!)

Have you tried the holiday Oreos? Why not?

Need a gift for her? This backpack is so pretty, holds a laptop and so much more, and I love the color. Or put it on your own Christmas list!

If you’re making trail mix this holiday season, you could give it away to friends or in stockings, in these cute mason jar zip bags!

Have you seen the world’s tallest filing cabinet? It’s in Vermont, and it’s a sight to see!

Have you ever watched apples being pressed to make apple cider? We had not, until this fall, and it was amazing. Cold Hollow Cider Mill lets you watch as the pallets of mashed apples are pressed into liquid! It’s fascinating.

I haven’t tried this, but I’ve heard it’s good: Make popcorn and place in a bag with salt and a bit of hot sauce, and shake. Then grab some popcorn and dip in pickle juice, and enjoy.

Want something interesting to read? Read about the history and the horses at the Morgan Horse Farm!

You can use a hair clip to organize your cords, yes you can...it works.

Have you heard the term annuitant? It’s a person who receives an annuity. Didn’t know that!

Before Rogers & Hammerstein, it was Rogers and Hart. Hart's story is told in the movie *Blue Moon*. Lots of language, but Ethan Hawke deserves an Oscar for this one.

There's a tiny game in a tin called Barbecubes – would make a cool stocking present for the family or older kids. Little food items and tongs you have to place on a tiny grill without losing them!

## **Bookstore – December - by Christina Oberon**

The idea for *Max, The Grumpy Rhino* came to life during my son's kindergarten year. Most mornings started with a few sleepy grumbles about getting ready for school (I'm sure many parents can relate!).

As I watched him navigate those early school mornings, I began thinking about how kids often feel big emotions they don't quite know how to express. Grumpiness is rarely just about being grumpy; sometimes it's tiredness, worry, or simply needing a little extra love. I wanted to write a story that showed children it's okay to feel that way, and that even the grumpiest hearts can find their way back to joy.

As the story developed, my son joined in on the fun and even created the cover art himself. That made this book extra special to me. It became not just a story about a rhino learning to love school, but a creative project born from real moments between a mom and her son. Through *Max, The Grumpy Rhino*, I hope families can talk about school emotions together in a loving, understanding way. I hope kids see that everyone has "grumpy days," and that kindness, from others and toward ourselves, can turn them around.

This little rhino will always remind me of those kindergarten mornings, when love, grumpiness, and a dash of creativity turned our sleepy struggles into something beautiful.



HOME

## Practical Parenting – Gifts – by Marcy Lytle

I have heard parents say, and I remember feeling this way as well, that they have to clean out the kids' rooms and closets before taking in any more gifts! So one of the goals before Christmas is to donate used toys and make room for the new. And while that's awesome, I know it's still sometimes frustrating to know just how many gifts a kid needs at Christmas, which gifts to buy, and then it's even more aggravating when the kids don't even like the gifts they get!

One response to gift frustration is to only give one toy, one book, one clothing item, etc. to somehow minimize and make more meaningful the gift-giving time. And that's an idea that works for some families, limiting all the excess, and focusing on the necessities.

One response to gift frustration is to yell at the kids and exhibit frustration when the gifts are torn into, offering thanks isn't happening, and you're alarmed at the little pieces in that toy that you're going to have to deal with. There's no organization, all is chaos, and Christmas can't be over fast enough.

One response to gift frustration is to throw our hands up and wonder how we're going to pay for all these things, but we want our kids to have more, the latest, and the greatest, and so we just spend and hope we can afford it all. And we find some sort of joy in wrapping all these things.

One response to gift frustration is to feel less than, get angry, and carry disappointment throughout the holidays because there's never enough funds for anything in the family, and Christmas just emphasizes the lack, and it's not fun at all.

There are lots of responses parents can have to all the gifts that our kids get or don't get, from us and from grandparents. And it can be maddening to fill kids' rooms again with more "stuff" or to see the emptiness of rooms when there's a year of lack.

So, what's the best way to respond to gift giving and receiving at Christmas? Whatever brings you peace and joy, in your family.

If the kids make a list, let them! Just have a talk about the blessing of Christmas and how gifts – any gifts – are always a bonus.

If the kids already have too much, instruct them! Just have a talk about how awesome it would be to share the bounty with others, and ask them to make a donation box and fill it. Pray that joy ensues.

If funds are scarce this year, pray together. Just have a talk about seasons and times, and give thanks for what you do have, and brainstorm creative giving this year – like making something, writing a poem, serving one another, sharing a verse, etc.

If you've already shown frustration and yelled, ask forgiveness. Sit quietly and still your own heart, and reassemble your thoughts and breathe, and take one day at a time. And pray over each gift you buy, and let it go – expecting any sort of special thanks or reaction from the kids.

If you feel this need to buy more and have the best, look deep. Rethink what Christmas means, and make a list and stick to it. Sure, indulge a bit if you want. But don't let the need to have more be your identity this Christmas. Look to the wonder of the season, and enjoy the meaningful gifts you share.

It's hard – Christmastime. But it doesn't have to be. Gift receiving doesn't need to be the central theme of the season. Yes, it's wonderful, but even more wonderful is the GIFT in Jesus. Donate. Share kindness to neighbors. Go see the lights. Enjoy cookies and hot cider. Celebrate advent. And when all of that leads up to Christmas morning, whatever takes place under the tree will just be like the stars that glitter on a clear cold night – fun to see emerge one by one – as we sing "O holy night..." together with grateful hearts.

## **I Don't Do Teens – What About Faith? – by Marcy Lytle**

I know every parent that loves their kids and loves God wants their kids to love God...that for sure is the #1 hope, am I right? And while many of us have different ways of trying to ensure that faith is planted and grows to maturity, there are many of us that worry because what we see in our kids isn't quite what we hoped for and prayed for, and we worry...what about their faith?

This story this month of December is a gift to you as parents, as you lay down that heavy load from your shoulders and enjoy the season and the gift of rest, regarding your kiddos:

If you presented faith to your children the best you knew how, and still do, breathe... You're not perfect, but God thrives in imperfection and even grows stronger in our weakness. We do our best, and then we leave the rest up to Him.

If you are transparent and let your kids see you thrive, fail, get up and ask forgiveness, and turn to the Word...they will observe that life is hard, but God is good, and His Word is THE RESOURCE for all things good. They may not read it now, like the reference book you wish they would, but they see...and they know...and they will remember.

If you enjoy your faith through worship, giving, serving, and they see the joy this brings you (and yes, the hard times as well), they will know that the gospel – the good living from the Word of God – is all about these things that sustain. And when they see you give, expecting nothing in return? Well, that's a deposit of gold.

If you keep offering a hand up to your kids in prayer, in faith, in instruction, on a daily basis through the life you're living – as weak and fumbling as you are at times – you deserve a pat on the back! Keep offering, keep doing, just like you keep feeding your kids at the table. They may pick and complain, but when they get hungry they will eat.

If you can somehow come to the truth that it's not you that has to be all-knowing, all-perfect, and always present...you can then place your worries down and set your hope in Him. He is all-knowing, all-perfect and always present, when you cannot be and were never created to be.

We don't want our kids to be clones of our faith, we want them to see God through everything we do – little to small – pitiful to great – and be the men/women of faith that He's created them to be. And committing that job over to Him is a big relief, even when we don't see with our eyes what we think indicates teens with faith.

Pray over your teens. Live your life loving God and serving others. Serve your family. Love your spouse. Do your best.

But in reality, nothing we do is best, and everything He does is.

So, rest. Enjoy the season. Love those teens of yours. Hug them. Affirm them. And lay them in His arms as your gift to Him this Christmas and receive His gift of peace to you...as the parent.

## **In Each Room – A Christmas Bedroom – by Marcy Lytle**

It seems that our own bedrooms are the last to be decorated, organized, made pretty, etc. because we're always doing and giving and making sure the rest of the house is presentable and livable for the family. This year I decided that I would decorate our bedroom first...and I can't tell you the joy it has given me each night as I enter the bedroom to end the day. It just makes me smile.

Here are some ways to make your bedroom Christmassy and pretty...just for you.

Change the sheets. Amazon has the prettiest holiday sheets you can place on your bed for Christmas and right through the winter. Ones with winter scenes are my favorite!

Change the throw pillows. Target has the cutest pillows, often in the Dollar Spot! Or just look around at the discount stores and choose one or two pillows for you.

Add a throw. I found the coziest, softest green throw to bunch up on the corner of the bed, to finalize the bed makeover.

It wasn't a lot of money to change out these things, keeping our comforter the same, and just accessorizing the bed!

Add lights. I found a cute skinny Christmas tree at Ross and placed it beside our chair. It's perfect and creates ambience when evening arrives.

Got a Christmas sack? Pick a big one and fill it with tissue and just set it on a chair, a bench or anywhere – in coordinating colors to the rest of your room.

Twine on a spool is a cute item for your nightstand, as is a Christmas book...little touches are easy and pretty. I found this spool of twine at Marshalls.

A scented candle or diffuser is so wonderful in the bedroom, or your bathroom...so you can add to the coziness that the holiday brings.

Just step back and look at your bedroom and see what little changes or additions you can make this holiday season, and leave it all there right through January. Why, not? Pick a favorite Christmas hue, use what you have around the house already, then just look for some cute accessories and enjoy.

You'll want to make your bed every morning, when it's decorated for the holidays. And you might just hum a holiday tune while you drift off to sleep...dreaming of sugar plums dancing and bright stars shining...

## **Homesteading - Choose Joy – by Leyanne Enterline**

With our current job and debt situation, I am trying by any means to see how we save money. Please feel free to share any money saving tips in the box below that you can! I need all the help I can get!

Besides the obvious, we don't eat out, we eat at home, we don't buy coffee, we can make it ourselves, and we try to knock out errands all in one day to save on gas. But what else? We don't have any monthly subscriptions or car payments.

Any time we're not in a room in our new home, I try and make sure the lights are off in that room. I turn the AC or turn down the heat, or turn both off, during the day. During the winter we have a fireplace that we keep going, as to try and not run the heat as much. I also try to buy groceries once a week and not go back for more in between visits! I stock up on food when it's on sale.

I have a garden and try to use whatever produce I get from that, to enjoy in our meals. I started making my own Kombucha and that saves tons! Those bottle are anywhere from \$3-6 a bottle and I can make 8 jars for \$6. And it's been fun! If anyone need a scoby let me know...

I used to try and get Amazon gift cards at Randall's grocery store and buy what I needed from there and that gave me a discount on gas, but the Randall's gas closest to me closed down.

We're on well water, so we don't pay for water. We don't have a trash service, as we just burn what we can!

I buy our meat from a local farmer and whatever veggies I can from there, as well. It seems to cost a little less than the grocery store depending on what I'm buying.

I even make my deodorant. I would like to try making toothpaste and laundry detergent but haven't tried that yet! That'll be next...

I'd love to hear your home money saving tips! Being extremely frugal has not been my favorite thing and worrying about money is rough!

But the Lord says,

"My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,"  
James 1:2 NKJV

So, we will be JOYFUL!

## **Rooted in Love - Fitting in Boxes – by Kaelin Scott**

One thing I love about homeschooling is that my kids aren't afraid to be themselves. In fact, they don't know any different. Without peer pressure and the desire to fit in with other students, they're free to bloom into exactly who they were created to be.

They're not embarrassed to still call me Mommy or that I still tuck them in every night. They read books and watch shows they like, not whatever the popular thing is. Their sense of identity isn't rooted in which crowd they're accepted into or what other kids are saying about them. Their self-esteem isn't constantly under attack, so it's easier for them to be secure in who they are.

Now, I'm not saying kids in public school can't be themselves. I just know from experience that it can be difficult. Growing up is confusing as it is, but adding others' opinions into the mix makes it even harder to figure out who you are. As a pretty reserved kid in a rather large school, I often felt insecure and overlooked, and I had no strong sense of identity. I bent myself to fit into certain boxes in the hope that people would like me, and that unfortunately continued into adulthood. It wasn't until my late twenties that I finally started to be comfortable in my own skin.

But that isn't God's heart for me, nor is it His heart for you. He wants us to be secure in our identity, because our identity is found in Him. He calls us His beloved children, His precious and treasured creations. He sees every tear that falls from our eyes and counts the number of hairs on our heads. He promised to be with us always and lead us like a good shepherd. He created us in His own image, and He loves us so much more than we could ever imagine.

With that in mind, how could we ever doubt our worth? We know who we are because we know *whose* we are. It doesn't matter what other people think about us because we are daughters of the King of Kings. Therefore, we can have confidence in who we were created to be. We can keep our heads held high, knowing that nothing could ever pluck us from His hand. Even when we feel all alone, He is holding us tight. He will never stop loving us, and that should be enough to allow us to love ourselves. Maybe we don't fit in with the world, but that's okay. Fitting into the kingdom is far more valuable than any earthly acceptance.

You, my friend, are a precious creation. Don't let the loud voices of this world dim your light. Listen to the still small voice, whispering that you are His. You don't have to pretend to be someone else. You don't need to strive to fit in. Today, tomorrow, and forever – you are loved.

## A Night to Remember – Adore Him – by Marcy Lytle

Do your kids know the meaning of the word adore? Do they know who it is and why they love, respect and worship God as a family, and how it's important as an individual as well? Christmas month is a great time to sit down and adore Him together, and alone...the One who Christmas is all about.

Preparation: Use colored ribbons from your wrapping stash and provide four different ones, about 3 feet long each, to use as your props. Options might be blue, red, green and gold.

Isaiah 9:6 says

*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.*

This is who Jesus is, and let's look at the meaning, the wisdom, and the privilege of the One we adore.

Ask one child to use adore in a sentence (ex: I just adore your shoes! Where did you get them? – adult can do this and child can copy)

We often adore something someone else has because we just love the way it looks, and we'd love to have it!

Let's look at the last part of our verse – the PRINCE OF PEACE.

Think of a prince in a story you've read – describe him.

Jesus is the prince of all princes – he rules over the kingdoms in our hearts – with peace.

What scene in December looks peaceful outside – describe it.

Place the blue ribbon of peace in the center of the table.

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Ask a child to use the word wonderful in a sentence (ex: Isn't it wonderful that we get to go on a vacation!) It's something so full in our loves that it causes us to wonder in awe!

Our verse calls Jesus Wonderful Counselor – a counselor gives us wisdom and guides us. And the wisdom we find in his Word is indeed Wonderful!

Describe something wonderful about Christmas.

Jesus is more wonderful than anything we can wonder about!

Place the red ribbon in the center of the table.

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Ask a child to use the word mighty in a sentence (ex: What a mighty strong man he is! Look at his muscles!)

Our verse says He is a Mighty God – one who performs deeds too hard for us to do! He takes care of all that concerns us with his mighty arm!

Describe someone you know that has strong arms.

Jesus is our Mighty God – and we adore this about him!

Place the green ribbon in the center of the table

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Ask a child to use the word government in a sentence (ex. Our government includes a president and vice-president and lots of law makers.)

Our verse says the government will be on His shoulders – the one who is in control of the earth and all that's in it – not man. This means we can rest in knowing He takes care of our world around us.

Who likes to be carried on the shoulders of a strong adult? Jesus is our strong one and we adore Him!

Place the gold ribbon in the center of the table

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The first part of the verse says that unto us a child is born, a son is given. God gave his only son for us, sent him here as a baby boy to grow up and die for our sins, so that we can live. His sacrifice for our life. What a reason to adore Him!

Grab the ends of all the ribbons as a family and sing "O Come let us adore Him" together as you raise the ribbons in worship to the One we adore – his name is Jesus.

End with silent individual prayers as you each bow your heads in adoration to Jesus...thinking about the peace and joy he brings us all.



YOU

A little girl wishing for Christmas  
Father Christmas was sure to hear her pleas  
He wouldn't forget them, would he?  
Would the planes and the bombs keep him  
away?

Five stockings hung by the fire with hope.  
Hope for peace

Hope for a celebration of His birth

No matter how meager the trappings, the faith was still there  
No goose to be had  
No pudding or cake

But the love of each other shone brighter than fear  
An orange, some walnuts, and a dear sugar mouse filled  
the stockings that year.

They bowed their heads and said a prayer  
for Jesus, for those fighting for them, for better days

A little girl wishing for Christmas  
And finding it every day  
right there at home

## **A Hopeful Heart – When Good-bye Meets Grace – by Christina Oberon**

This month marks one year since losing my dad. His departure from this earth on Christmas morning still haunts me some days and fills the approaching holidays with a silent dread. I've often thought about how grief causes you to think of someone every single day, when, if you're honest, you didn't always do so while they were alive. Why is that?

This time last year, my sister and I traveled across the world to Thailand to sit beside our dad in the hospital as his body rapidly declined. We couldn't have a conversation with him, his memory and speech had already been taken by the brain tumor that showed no mercy. We couldn't take him outside, either. He had lost the ability to sit or walk. My dad loved to walk everywhere, to explore, to wander, to discover. He loved freedom. Seeing him confined to a bed broke something in me. When my sister and I left Thailand, I remember staring out the airplane window letting the tears fall, feeling helpless in leaving my dad behind, knowing he would soon be leaving us forever. It was only a matter of time.

At the start of this year, the grief consumed me, draining both my mental and physical strength. As the months went on, I found my footing again, but certain days like my birthday, his birthday, Father's Day, and even the changing seasons, all brought me back to that initial ache of loss. Sometimes, reminders appeared unexpectedly: a bird chirping, the number seven, his name, a meal, a joke or a phrase he used to say... and I'm caught between feeling a sweet fondness or a deep sorrow.

In this first year of grief, I've learned some things about grief itself and about myself. Grief doesn't follow a timeline. It moves in waves, either soft and steady, or crashing without warning. There are days it feels lighter, and others when the ache returns as if no time has passed at all. I've learned that healing doesn't mean forgetting. I keep finding new ways to carry love forward.

I've learned that grief changes you. It has deepened my empathy, reshaped my priorities, and taught me to slow down and notice life's fragile beauty. It's made me more aware of time, how fleeting it is, and how precious every moment truly becomes once you've lost someone you love. And I've learned that God meets us in grief. Not always with answers, but with presence. In the moments when I miss my dad the most, I've felt God's comfort reminding me that love doesn't end at the grave. It continues, just differently.

This first year has been one of tears and tenderness, and also remembering and rebuilding. I still miss him so much, especially as Christmas approaches. I can still hear him saying, "Happy Christmas!" in his cheerful British accent. Christmas was his favorite and now, it feels forever entwined with his memory. I wish I could have one more conversation and hear his voice again. I wonder what life updates he would have to share. But I also carry gratitude for the father I had for a time, for the memories we shared, and for the promise that this goodbye isn't forever.

My dad may be gone from this world, but I'm not fatherless. I rest in the love of my Heavenly Father, who remains constant and close.

## **Healthy Habits – Safe in the Car – by Marcy Lytle**

We recently watched a very entertaining movie called *Good Fortune*, and there were angels in the movie – each assigned to different tasks for humans. One angel was the one that tapped people on the shoulder while driving, to put away their phones! Hilarious. That made me think, though, that we all need reminders of staying healthy behind the wheel, while driving this Christmas season.

*Of course, don't text.* – If you're tempted to do so, put your phone in the glove compartment or in the back seat, so you won't even text while driving, at all. Not even at a red light, when you still need to be aware of your surroundings.

*Check controls* – Before you set out on slippery roads or rainy drives or long trips, check all your wipers, your seat controls, etc. just to refresh your memory so that you won't be fumbling around while driving. Keeping eyes on the road – that's the goal.

*Emergency pack ready?* - Maybe you live where it's cold so you need a basket or box with a blanket, hand warmers, etc. in case of a prolonged stop in the car. Hats and bug spray still might be a necessity where you live. Whatever your winter brings, be ready with a pack of the goods you might need.

*JIC Jar* – we have one of these in our glove box. It has little items we all need from time to time, "just in case." We have salt and pepper packets, a straw, plastic fork, Ibuprofen, Scotch tape, nail clippers, a hair clip, a Band-aid, etc. and it all fits in a small box that stays in the glove box. We use it all the time!

*Clean and stay clean* – Nasty Kleenexes piling up in your door pockets? Do you even have tissues available in the car? Is there a garbage sack? Is the carpet clean? Make a routine of keeping the car clean this winter season.

*To-go drinks* – do you have a Stanley or other to-go cup? Maybe it's time to refresh and make sure you have ones that fit in your cup holders. And by the way, clean those out, too!

*Air freshener there?* - How long has it been hanging or clipped in your car? Since last Christmas? Having something nice to smell while driving makes everyone smile. Bath and Body has options!

*Kid packs* – You might be road tripping a lot this season, so grab some zipper bags and make car activity pouches for the kids that you can leave in the car. Easy, and nice, and gives you a break when running out the door! Books, too!

*Make some car rules* – and share them with your riders. No arguing, no fighting, no loud noise, etc. and talk about how it all affects the driver and the atmosphere on the road. Safety is paramount!

*Pray* – A prayer before you set out to see loved ones, go to parties, travel to see family, can ease tension and stress so much. Give thanks, ask for provision, and bless those you're going to see.

What else would you add to have your travel home (your car) a healthy place to ride?

## Inner Strength - Confident Connection – by Michelle Wyatt

If you were to write a letter to someone, who would it be? Have you ever written a letter to yourself? Today I want to share my most recent letter to God which kind of turned in to a letter to myself and now to you.

*Dear Lord,*

*You are the source of my strength. You've been my father my whole life and still are. I was blessed to have a dad as amazing as he was. He didn't have the ability to move mountains like you do. He did wear many hats though, as the expression goes. My dad knew when to listen, offer advice, give a hug, let me cry, lean on him, have chit chat then serious talks. He was firm when he needed to be. There were times he wasn't happy with me and I hated that. I knew he loved me no matter what, though. So in a lot of ways. you are like he was. The biggest difference is he didn't have a say in your plan for me. So much was out of his control, as is for all of us. As the Serenity Prayer says, may we have courage to change the things that we can and wisdom to know what that is. And just like the song from Carrie Underwood song titled "Jesus Take the Wheel" goes...*

*Jesus take the wheel  
Take it from my hands  
'Cause I can't do this on my own  
I'm letting go  
Give me one more chance  
And save me from this road I'm on  
Jesus, take the wheel*

It takes courage to let go and turn our life over to God. When we do let go, our soul opens up and receives strength, thus, establishing a greater, more confident connection with God.

Last Sunday, my pastor spoke of the very same concept - having confidence with God and spiritual formation. Confidence grows by connecting three areas of life – God's Word, God's Spirit, and God's People. This is how he broke it down...

God's Word (Meaningful Faith) – Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

God's Spirit (Meaningful Experiences) – Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our heart sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

God's People (Meaningful Relationships) – And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and do good works.

I appreciate the opportunity to share this with you. I pray that whether it's the letter, the song, and/or the concept that my pastor spoke about, you will receive inner strength that you didn't have before.

Creating confidence in ourselves, in our relationship with others, and in relationship with our God is a process. Give yourself grace along the way. You are needed!

If I can take this journey, so can you! God bless you!

## Life Right Now - Be Present By Jennifer Stephens

The tree is trimmed. The stockings hung. And each gift carefully wrapped with ribbons and bows. The only remaining task is party prep.

Whether it's a huge holiday gathering of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins filling multiple tables or a very small group that fits comfortably around one tiny table, my goal is to create a festive Christmas buffet for friends and family. Blending everything I've learned from my 1990 *Martha Stewart Living* subscription with the latest Instagram trends, I'm already mentally planning menus, activities, and tablescapes. Before the chopping, slicing, and baking begins, I'm busy digging through cabinets and cupboards searching for the perfect tablecloths, seasonal serving dishes, and multi-tiered trays fit for the occasion. The evening before the guests arrive, each dish has been strategically placed in the perfect spot (and, yes, labeled with a Post-it indicating its future contents – insert husband's eye roll) awaiting the delicious concoctions soon to fill the empty spaces.

One might think with all of these advanced preparations I'd be an easy, breezy relaxed hostess by the time the guests arrive. Not always! Okay, not ever. But I'm working on it.

Why does striving to create a Martha-esque party turn us into Martha from Luke 10? Every year I catch myself in the kitchen frantically fretting over every insignificant detail. But I long to be more like Mary. Anyone else?

Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus welcome their friend Jesus into their home whenever He's in town. While Martha loses herself in the frenzy of preparing a meal for Jesus (I'd bet she'd use Post-it's too, if she had some!), she notices her sister Mary sitting calmly at His feet. Mary soaks in every word He had to say. Martha is fuming! She's working her tail off and her sister is just sitting there, not lifting a finger to help! Martha was so anxious and irritated with her sister she asked Jesus to tell Mary to help her! But Jesus surprises Martha when he says Mary's choice to sit with Him is better than getting worried and upset.

Jesus isn't calling out Martha because of her efforts to serve – serving others is a good thing – but He is reminding her to reconsider her priorities. When hosting a party should we spend time worrying the cookie platter is perfectly angled towards the platter of shrimp cocktail or should we be present with our guests? With anything life throws our way, should we waste time in worry or should we seek God's presence? That's what Mary did. Unbothered by the cultural expectations to spend time baking bread, she chose to spend time savoring the words of Jesus. She chose to be in the presence of Jesus.

This Christmas season as we prepare to host friends and family in our homes, let's strive to be more like Mary. Less anxiety. Less worry. In this season of giving presents, let's just be present.



MARRIAGE

## Date Night Fun – Five Colors of Christmas – by Marcy Lytle

It's Christmas month, my goodness...hard to believe. And it's most likely that date night with your spouse is a low priority, because of all the activities, the gift wrapping, the food making, the family obligations, etc. However, carving out just a few hours a week with each other to connect can give you the boost you need to get it all done. Here are some fun ways to make time together this hurried but festive time of year, focusing on the five colors of Christmas.

**Red** – Poinsettias come to mind, when associating red for Christmas. Consider purchasing three poinsettia plants from your local nursery and delivering them to another couple's porch with a note, for a Christmas surprise. Enjoy a slice of red velvet cake afterwards (buy or make) and give thanks for the friends you just shared with...

**Gold** – Maybe a gold star sits atop your tree, or atop trees around the city. Take a drive and look for gold stars. Find a high spot on a clear night and park, with thermoses and treats, and observe the stars as they appear when the sun goes down. Read the story of the wise men together as they brought their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Give thanks.

**Green** – The evergreen Christmas tree. Is yours up, yet? Make your date night around that tree, or some green tree somewhere. It can be in a park, at a mall, in a restaurant, or at home by your own tree. Think of the everlasting love of God and all the green that is present in our world, which represents growth. Affirm each other in areas where you've seen each other grow. Maybe purchase one more ornament and hang it on the tree, together.

**Silver** – When is the last time you really listened to the carol "Silver Bells?" Children laughing, people passing on every street corner – so get out where the crowds are! Visit your local mall and grab a pretzel and sit...observe the people passing and smile at everyone. Silver bells...can you stroll the mall and see what you can find that's silver – maybe bells or other decorations? Marvel together at the beauty of Christmas, amid all the hustle and bustle, and purpose together to focus on the good this time of year.

**White** – Maybe this represents snowflakes that you either love or hate, maybe depending on where you live. I'm guessing you do love the beauty of them, even though too many can be a pain. White represents purity. White twinkle lights, white (vanilla) ice cream, white clouds, white polar bears, white rice and white chocolate. Make it a night to find and enjoy three things white. Use that list or look for other things. Laugh out loud and enjoy the evening.

Some of the above ideas can be enjoyed with the entire family, so mix and match them, and keep these ideas handy all month long, as you stroll, shop and sing along with joy. Together.

## **After 40 Years – Other Gifts – by Marcy Lytle**

Yes, we still get gifts for each other, which seems contrary to a lot of couples that have been married a while. We do love to travel, but those trips aren't our gifts. We enjoy having wrapped packages to open along with the kids, when we celebrate Christmas with them! But just in case you want some "other" ideas for Christmas gifts for him, ones that aren't gifts to be wrapped, here's good list of ideas to surprise him with all month long. Starting December 1.

1. Grab his hand and dance – in the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom, or on the front porch. It doesn't have to be perfect or rehearsed, it's just a connection and a smile with feet moving.
2. Do his chore – Surprise him one morning by taking out the trash or some other common chore he has. Do it for him, expecting nothing in return.
3. Linger beside him a while – when sitting on the sofa after the show is over. Lay your head on his shoulder, and hold his arm, and tell him how much you love him.
4. Leave a sticky note on his steering wheel – not a novel idea, but a good one. A Christmas love note – why not!
5. Draw his bath – with candles lit – instead of his normal shower. Invite him to sit and soak and linger and enjoy.
6. Send him a card in the mail – yes, snail mail! Write a sweet note inside and mail it to him, and I bet he will love it!
7. Send him a card via email, too, on another day! There are lots of free options to use on the web, just pick one and delight his day!
8. Read together – at a coffee shop - books you both enjoy – and sip and smile – then share a while.
9. Buy new cologne and perfume for the two of you – while out together shopping for others. Enjoy the scents and renew the romance.
10. Organize one of his drawers, if you think he'd allow and love. I think he will love!
11. Make his favorite treat and surprise him with it at work, or one night after dinner, or in the car while out and about.
12. Make hot tea for him, with honey and lemon, one cold morning and bring it to him in bed.
13. Take him to breakfast one weekend morning, to his favorite spot and don't cringe if he orders biscuits and gravy.
14. Compliment what he's wearing and how nice he looks, be specific, and give him a kiss.
15. Leave a treat on the seat of his car one morning.
16. Add a lunch note in his to-go lunch or on his plate, like you did/do for the kids. A little rhyme about how much you love him!
17. Plan a date, and invite him out, with time and place and what to wear!
18. Offer a spa night for him, while you rub his feet with lotion, massage his neck, and whatever you think of!
19. Get tix to a sports game and tuck them under his pillow, for you and him, or him and a friend.
20. Sit next to him while watching a holiday show, instead of in separate recliners – that's a no!
21. Ask him outside with hot chocolate in hand, to observe the sunset on a clear cool evening.
22. Grab his hands and pray out loud over him before he starts his day.
23. Clean his car, inside and out, if you can – as a surprise!

24. Take him to his favorite store and let him browse, even if it's a hardware store, and listen to him dream about that next big tool.
25. Set a surprise treat in the fridge – maybe cheesecake or ice cream – and invite him to seek and find one night for fun!

If that sounds stressful or too much, only pick a few that fit you! If he never does anything for you like this, ask and pray that you can give anyway – and leave it up to God to speak to your husband. That's the only thing that works! And give anyway. Don't expect some sort of response, or get disappointed if there is none. Give as if you're giving unto Him – because you are. And enjoy.

### **In Unison – Gratitude – by Terri Barnes**

Gratitude plays an important role in marriage.  
It's easy to overlook gratitude when our perspective is clouded.  
We rush past the gold nuggets of our past.  
That's because we are looking more at what's approaching us.

It is good to look back for clear perspective or gain new vision.  
I took the journey and here's what I found.

Gratitude for making an apartment our first home.  
The anticipation of skipping town for our anniversaries.  
Recognition of our foundation - God at the center.  
Our commitment to maintaining attentiveness toward one another.

Gratitude for the good health of our premature born son.  
The immense joy of having our first home.  
The beginning of values regarding family unity.  
Loving support from people around us.

Gratitude for the excitement of purchasing our half-acre.  
The wonderful birth of our second baby boy.  
Our loyalty during some of the most challenging years of our marriage.  
God's faithfulness to never leave or forsake our union.

Gratitude for a church we call home.  
Embarking on new wonders in our marriage & our family unit.  
Appreciation for how we've grown in communication.  
The honor to guide our sons in faith.

I wrestled with writing on gratitude.  
I know it takes an intentional mindset.  
That which I didn't know if I was ready or willing.

Also, because it is a spiritual discipline.  
When recognized, it exuberates God's kindness & gentleness.  
Therefore, gratitude is a wonderful gift for marriage.

I wonder if you would take the journey.  
Seek out gratitude in your marriage.  
First, look back with an intentional heart.  
Then proceed...



ENCOURAGEMENT

## A Day in the Life – The Leaning Tree - by Bekah Holland

Here we are again, friends. The holidays. That magical time of year when the smell of freshly baked cinnamon rolls fills the air (and yes, store bought canned ones still count because I said so), carols echo softly in the background (or in my case, likely a combination of Mariah Carey and Home Alone), and every woman I know is just one more school holiday concert away from crying in the pantry.

Let's just be honest...the holidays aren't a season anymore. They're a freaking Olympic level 2 month long marathon! Around this time every year, I start adding more items to my never-going-to-be-completed to-do lists while still pretending there's a snowball's chance in hell I'll ever check all the boxes. And to any of you who moonlight as an unpaid project/holiday manager, therapist, hostage negotiator (because teenagers and family), and professional shopper who finds yourself saying "I'm fine, it's fine, we're all fine" on repeat while whisper yelling at the box of tangled Christmas lights that were NOT tangled when you put them in there last year...I see you. I am you.

While seemingly everyone else is frolicking around in matching pajamas and pretending their family pictures didn't involve 47 retakes, we're the ones trying to remember if we actually bought that one important gift, or if that was just one of those things we started to order, got distracted and definitely did not get back to it. I have also been known to buy gifts that I put in hiding places so good that I don't find them again until March. Like, almost every single year.

Pinterest leads us to believe that the holidays are about elegant tablescapes, fresh garlands, cocoa bars, and children who smile photogenically with no eye rolling or snarky comments. If I've learned anything (usually the hard way), it's that the holidays aren't about perfection. They're about people. And people, bless our hearts, are messy. Which is probably why grace matters more this time of year than tinsel, presents, or perfectly decorated trees.

My holidays? Let's just say my garland is from 2014 and sheds more than the dog, my kids look like they escaped from a witness protection program in every photo, and the only cocoa bar I have is a half-eaten Hershey's in the junk drawer.

Also, I have a special gift for selecting our yearly Christmas tree every year. It leans. It *starts out* leaning.

It is ALWAYS leaning.

At this point, I've accepted that the tree and I are simply reflecting each other's emotional posture. Leaning, slightly confused, and held together with pure determination and some creative rope and twine accents.

But here's the thing. Despite all the chaos, the overwhelming anxiety, and the panic of running out of wrapping paper with two gifts left to go...this season still holds something soft. Something sacred. Something that reminds us why we keep showing up, even when we're running solely on coffee and, well, more coffee.

The magic around us doesn't come from perfect décor or plans that actually go like they're supposed to. It comes from that late-night wrapping session on Christmas Eve, even though every single year you swear you're never waiting that late again (you will). Or the moment someone laughs so hard they snort (that's usually me, but still). It comes from the Christmas movie night

where everyone actually gets along for 27 full minutes. The traditions that make your heart feel like home and the peace that sneaks up on you in the middle of the mess.

Now, let's talk a little about thankfulness. Not the Instagram version where we pretend to be grateful for "the little things" while we're really taking deep, panic-stricken breaths while covered in whatever essential oil is supposed to be calming. I mean the real kind. The kind that grows in the middle of imperfection. I don't believe we were meant to glide through life untouched. We're meant to grow, to stretch, to find gratitude in the places we didn't expect it. That's where the good stuff hides...right in the middle of the mess. Because it may be messy, but it's ours. Gratitude doesn't erase the chaos...it just makes the chaos feel a little more worthwhile.

Finally, here's my little Christmas pep talk for anyone else limping through to the finish line...

If Jesus can feed 5,000 with some loaves and fish, I think He can handle your overcooked sugar cookies. Let the cookies burn. That's why God invented UberEats and Tiff's Treats. Give up and rock the mismatched pajamas. And if the dog drinks half the tree water, at least they're hydrated. Be proud that the memories you make are real. Don't sweat the Martha Stewart-esque social media snapshots you run across. I can almost guarantee that their kids didn't have a cardboard roll fight after giving up on a wrapping even one more present to put under the tree. Again, I'll take those core memories and sometimes barely taped up boxes of homemade gifts over a pretty picture any day!

And most of all, give yourself the permission to lean... just like my tree. We lean, but we don't topple. That's our superpower. You're doing beautifully, even if it doesn't look like it from the outside. Remember to give everyone a little extra grace (especially yourself). Offer extra smiles to strangers, even the mom in the carpool line who honks at you for pulling up in the wrong line. Don't forget that we are all facing the silent, invisible battles...and the smallest acts of kindness can send out ripple effects that we'll never see. Be the reason someone believes in hope again.

And if this particular season of life has taught me anything, it's that hope doesn't always show up in big, shiny packages. Sometimes it looks like a warm hug, a kind word, or the simple reminder that we're not alone in any of this. So from my leaning tree to yours...I hope your holidays are filled with more laughter than tears, small joys, unexpected peace, and the kind of gratitude that settles into your bones. We made it through another year y'all, and honestly, that alone deserves a standing ovation... or at least an uninterrupted nap.

## Under Pressure - What a Messiah – by Debbie Haynes

Let's talk about the birth of Jesus...but perhaps not in the traditional way.

In Luke 1, Gabriel announces to Mary that a child will be born and he will be called holy, The Son of God. So, from the very beginning, we are told without a doubt who this angelic assignment is about.

In Luke 3, Jesus is then preparing to begin his earthly assignment when John the Baptist is baptizing many people, and Jesus says, "I want you to baptize me, too." We then read that when all the people were baptized and Jesus was too, the heavens opened and a voice spoke from heaven saying, "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased."

God cleared up any doubt about Jesus' identity – he claimed him as his own – his beloved son.

A bit later, we read the genealogy of Jesus...over 15 verses or so...and we see the Son of God at the end of the list. God left no doubt that Jesus was his Son whom he'd sent to earth on a divine assignment!

In Luke 4, we read that Jesus, the Son of God, full of the Holy Spirit, was then led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, where Jesus grew hungry. His very authority was challenged, as was his identity. Jesus was unshaken, however, and passed every test. It then reads that he returned in power and went throughout all the country teaching...

He came to his town where he had been raised, and he began to unroll and read from a scroll. He read "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim the good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." Then he sat down and everyone's eyes were fixed upon him.

Those who heard this spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words coming from the mouth of Jesus and said, "Is not this the carpenter's son?" (referring to Joseph)

Within the divine assignment of Jesus are 10 reasons why he, the Messiah, was anointed. Here are his assignments:

1. Preaching good tidings to the poor/meek
2. Binding up the brokenhearted
3. Proclaiming liberty to the captives
4. Opening prison doors to those who are bound
5. Proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord – the day of Salvation – today
6. Proclaiming the day of vengeance to those who reject his salvation
7. Comforting all that mourn
8. Appointing unto those that mourn – beauty for ashes
9. Giving the oil of joy to those who mourn
10. Giving a garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness

Four "telling" and six "giving" assignments!

Jesus knew who he was and why he came. He knew his assignment would be rejected by men, even plotted against. But he had a job to do as the faithful, loyal, loving son of God, and he performed his assignment magnificently!

Later, in John 10, we read Jesus words, "I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. But I am the good shepherd and I know my own and my own know me. Just as the father knows me and I know the father and I lay down my life for the sheep."

Wow! What a divine assignment, what a Savior, what a Shepherd, what a Messiah.

## An Adage a Day - Heavens to Betsy! – by Carole Gilbert

Heavens to Betsy! It's December! It's a time when we're excited to see family and friends and celebrate the holiday together. We're happy to see every Tom, Dick, and Harry and our favorite Jack of all trades. Also, Fancy Nancy and Chatty Cathy are on our minds. It's a time to lift up and give joy to everyone, even and especially, Debbie Downer and Negative Nelly. It's when we celebrate the birth of our Lord!

So, we exclaim, "Heavens to Betsy!" What a time of the year! But who was Betsy? It was not Betsy Ross, the woman who sewed our American flag. In fact, I googled and researched, and no one really knows who Betsy was. But whoever Betsy was, she made enough of an impression on somebody that they used her when they responded with excitement, "Heavens to Betsy!"

I heard this idiom on the radio one day when I was traveling. It was actually a preacher that said it in one of his sermons. It surprised me to hear this phrase from a preacher.

I thought out loud, "Wow! That seemed strange. I haven't heard that phrase in a long time."

My great grandmother said this phrase quite often when I was growing up. She used it when she was excited, surprised, and sometimes even aggravated. It's a good old phrase and one for all those unexpected moments like the one I had when I saw that my granddaughter had gotten into chocolate! And it's a good one for Christmas. And you might ask, "How is this phrase associated with Christmas?" I looked up Betsy at Christmas and was shocked. "Heavens to Betsy!" There are quite a few!"

There are famous bakers of Christmas treats, like Betsy Ann American Chocolates and her special Christmas varieties that started in 1938. This is one of my favorite of the Betsys I found. I thought about trying her chocolates, but they seem to be mostly at Macy's and the closest one to us is two hours away. So shucks, I'll have to wait. There are also Hallmark ornament collections, one named, "Betseys Country Christmas," by artist Betsey Clark. There are movie characters like Betsy in the movie *A Christmas Carol*, and Christmas themed books, with the main character named Betsy. Other Betsys include the lady I previously mentioned, Betsy Ross. And adding to the list is a restaurant named Betsy's, like the one at Evelyn Park in Bellaire, Texas, in the Houston area.

As I continued to research, there are no Biblical references for "Heavens to Betsy" but there are quite a few verses in reference of heaven for us. One of my favorites shows the same excitement as the idiom I'm talking about.

Psalm 97:6

*The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory.*

While this idiom Heavens to Betsy dates to the mid 1800's, seeing and proclaiming God's glory dates a lot further back than that. And while there's no known origin of the idiom's creator, its meaning is of excitement, surprise, or fear, the same emotions we will experience when we get to heaven. I bet there will be a lot of people saying this phrase, "Heavens to Betsy," when their time comes. If my jaw rises enough to speak, I know I will.

Betsy sounds like a fun name to have. I don't know any Betsys. Do you? However, the main thing I want to relate to you now, thanks to Betsy, is that I hope, whether you're a Betsy or not, or even if you know a Betsy or not, that you, this Christmas, have many, "Heavens to Betsy" moments!

## Unearthly Thing - The Cleansing Power of Stain Remover and the Kingdom of God – by Angela Dolbear

I just got back from a week at the [Florida Christian Writers Conference](#), which was amazing. I learned a lot about storytelling, and I met with a literary agent to possibly represent my latest work of fiction, THE MID-CENTURY BREAKFAST CLUB. This could change a lot for me if my book is published and out in the world. I believe it is a good book God gave me —one that will encourage as well as entertain, especially mothers of adult children who pray for them regularly (that's the premise of the novel).

I was so nervous about meeting with this agent. My sweat became lethal to the white blouse I was wearing under a red jacket. The nerves' potency caused pink-hued stains around the collar and under the arms of my cute white blouse with black polka dots. My red jacket has been washed many times, and has never bled before. Yikes. I had to rub [OxiClean Max Force stain remover](#) into the stains to get them out. It's like a superhero for my blouses.

On a side note, it's essential for someone like me, who frequently spills food on herself, to have a powerful stain fighter on hand at all times. I only recently allowed white shirts back into my wardrobe, because I love the contrast with all the other black clothing in my closet. Now I know I have an effective stain fighter for spills and anxiety sweat.

Back to the conference...my meeting with the agent hung over me like a heavy cloud of anxiety for the first two days of the conference. My anxiousness started to ruin my time there. I was distracted and wanted to leave class to practice my pitch, rather than sticking around to learn something new about writing.

That's when I stopped myself. I walked out to the edge of Lake Yale, where the conference was held. I sat by a cross to pray.

This behavior didn't seem right. A child of the Most High God doesn't—or shouldn't—allow herself to get this worked up about anything—especially something in the world. I started to notice that weighty prickliness of sin.

I took a deep breath to prepare my mind and soul to go before my Lord.

“Father, what’s wrong with me? I know this isn’t right.”

*You haven’t put Me first.*

Ouch. The still small voice that spoke to my soul rang with volumes of truth. “Please forgive me. Teach me. I know better than to be like this.”

*I’m always with You. Trust in Me.*

Along with His voice, I heard the reminder to recall Bible verses that I stowed away in my mind, as my sharpest weapon, such as John 14:1, where Jesus says, “Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and also in Me.”

I had, yet again (insert heavy sigh), let my heart be troubled. God's consistent patience, grace, and mercy astound me. I genuinely feel bad for people who don't believe in God and don't know Him close enough to ask Him for help. I can't imagine going through life without Him.

So, it was time to invoke some self-tough-love. Every time I started to fret over my pitch meeting, I said in my mind (I may have whispered it out loud a time or two): "God is with me. Do not let your heart be troubled."

I even went so far as to get strict with my mind so I could sleep, by commanding my brain, "You're not allowed to think about that anymore." Instead, I would fill my mind with Psalm 23, which speaks of the Lord as my Shepherd. It's one of my favorites. The direct, personal statements from God, as well as the serene pastoral imagery, never fail to fill me with peace.

This little sheep is prone to wander, and is so grateful when the Shepherd attentively pulls her back from self-sabotaging practices.

The pitch meeting went well. The agent was kind and listened to my pitch. She offered some insightful suggestions and asked me to send her a book proposal, which is encouraging. I'm working on that now, along with my author platform. These are essential items in my profession, which I'm learning more about each day.

I know God is with me, and I will trust Him and not let my heart be troubled with discouragement (my new adversary). I believe the Creator of the Cosmos will have no trouble leading me through the publishing profession.

I know He will help. He is so good like that.

And I'm so grateful to God that He not only removed the stains from one of my favorite blouses, but cleansed the stains from my soul by forgiving my fret-filled behavior and equipping me with tools for victory. Again, He is so good.

Blessings to you!

*Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as **THE GARDEN KEY** Series and **THE TORMENTOR'S TALE**, as well as many short stories. Her latest release, **The Mid-Century Breakfast Club**, is the fourth book in **The Garden Tales** series. Her novels are available on [Amazon](#) in paperback, Kindle, and audiobook formats. Angela writes real, relatable, and reverent fiction. She loves reading, writing prose, and writing and recording music in her studio in Nashville, TN—listen to her latest album **STORMS** on your favorite music streaming service. Please drop by and sign up for news, read the latest stories, and hear new original music at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>.*

# One Thing Leads to Another—Dec 2025

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Somewhere around eleven years ago, near the beginning of my prayer garden adventure, I made a granite path from each side of the front of the house all the way around to the back. It's almost a full circle (more oval, really) around the house. It's lined with beds of plants, except for the right side, which is where I store my supplies.

It was quite a lot of work, but it was fulfilling and enjoyable, with God speaking to me along the way (see past article *Living Stones* in the 2016 archives). I started it myself, laying the stone borders and landscape fabric, hauling load after load of decomposed granite, then spreading, raking, and tamping. Starting from the front walkway, I went across, then around the left side of the house to the back gate. On the advice of a landscape designer, 3-4 feet wide—not a narrow path. A wide path allows for the overgrowth of plants, which can completely obstruct a narrow one as they grow, which I've found out to be true. I also laid the path on the right side of the house.

When it came to the back—from side gate to the other side gate—let's say I was older and wiser and realized help would be helpful. I found someone who laid a steel border and made the path, which is quite large, for a very reasonable price.

After a few years, I was given some small granite stone which I made the mistake of adding to parts of the path. Don't do this! When raking the path, the larger rocks are raked up with acorns and larger debris, so you either have to separate them somehow or just throw them in the bin with the debris. "One-half minus" decomposed granite is the standard (which I used originally) and that's the best, at least for a yard like mine that drops acorns and twigs.

After eleven years, the rain had washed away some of the smaller particles, leaving bare spots and bigger stones. Finally, with cooler weather at hand, it was time to resurface the path, and it just so happened my sixteen-year-old grandson needed to earn some money. This time I had a delivery truck dump four yards of  $\frac{1}{2}$  minus on my driveway and hired my grandson and his two cousins to do the work. I helped a little for the fun of it.

And what fun we had! They worked for five hours, with short breaks and a hotdog lunch. They listened to Christmas music and sang and danced as they shoveled. They shouted out lines from the movie *Holes*: "*I'm tired of digging, Grandpa!*" and then answering, "*Well that's too dang bad, keep digging!*" It filled my heart with joy to watch them, and it was worth every penny of their generous wage. After they dumped wheelbarrows full of granite all around and raked it smooth, they put away tools and it was time to go.

They did the heavy lifting, but I still have work to do. I overestimated the amount of granite I needed, so there's a pile in the driveway. The path needs to be watered down and tamped and I'll use some of the granite to fill low spots as it's tamped down. One thing leads to another: as I'm doing this, I see that much of the rock edging has sunk down and is buried. In preparation for resurfacing, I had raked up much of the larger stones. Now I'm using them as a base underneath the stones as I dig them up and bring the border to its original height.

# One Thing Leads to Another—Dec 2025

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As I work, I think...*This will most likely be the last time I do this. In another 11 years I'll be an octogenarian.* Mixed emotions stir my heart: amazement, surprise, gratefulness, nostalgia, joy and sorrow. Past, present, and future meld together as I face the reality of aging and uncertainty. I don't know how things will be in another 10 years, in my world and the world at large, but I'm confident I need not worry because the One and Only Creator acts in Love in every Time and Circumstance, though human eye may not see or understand.

In the meantime, I'll do what I love to do as long as I'm able—like the natural stone mosaic I'm now working on (which I'll tell you about next month!)—because one thing leads to another.

## **Moving Forward – Renewal – by Pam Charro**

You know, sometimes I just really need some NEW. I mean, I have walked with God through enough to know that when it feels like the end of the world, it isn't. And when I get discouraged, it usually doesn't last too long. I know this body is going to wear out, and I accept that I'm going to be achy or tired sometimes. Like all of us, I have new struggles constantly coming at me, and I handle all of it pretty well. However...

*some renewal would be so appreciated right about now*

That's why I'm so thankful that God's Word talks about renewal a lot. He knows we need it! And he is always up to something to bring newness to me when I need it most.

David says in the psalms that he is confident that he will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. I interpret that to mean that I don't have to wait until the next life. I know heaven is going to be glorious, but God is good now and is going to show it! He loves to be good and is perfectly capable of doing good right here on planet earth.

Another favorite scripture is in Isaiah 43, where God encourages his people to look for the new good he is already working on. It is his character to bring new good to our lives, and our job is to get to know and appreciate his character. That is where our times of refreshing will come from - believing that he is who he says he is, and rejoicing in it.

And, of course, in Revelation, the Bible talks about making all things new. That is who he is, no matter what is going on, the God of all things new.

I have to live in a temporary and broken world for now, a world of decay, disappointment, and fatigue. But my God is a God of life, and he is breathing freshness into my next steps even as I prepare to face this new day. I don't have to know what that looks like in order to be excited about it. I am just glad to know it is true and I look forward to the new good he is bringing.



FRESH THYME

## FRESH THYME – Encounters – by Marcy Lytle

Every time we go on vacation, we pray for encounters with people to listen, to learn, to bless, to pray for, to show kindness to, etc. And every time we go, we come with cool stories to remember, about people we met from all over the place, who were different from us, and who blessed us...or we had the opportunity to bless them! This past vacation was no exception...and most of them happened in one day! Let me tell you:

The first encounter was with a man who worked on the property where we stayed, and he was the brother of the inn owner. He was different. And he ended up being my favorite of all the folks we met on vacation, because he was different. I don't know how to describe him, but he was very chatty, had amazing adventure stories of his travels to tell, and was more than willing to help out in any area. He seemed to live simply and enjoy life, and that's it. He blessed us, because he exuded a sort of peaceful and kind existence, apart from the busy chaotic world.

Another encounter happened at a restaurant bar, where we sat because all the tables were taken. We saw a couple enter the room and sit at a table, but then they got up and asked if they could sit by us at the bar! I must say they were interesting, and had lots to say. She was a total meat eater – that's it – only meat. And she talked about how it had healed her gut to eat ½ pound of bacon a day, and only meat – and how veggies and fruit were bad for you. *What?* This couple was relocating to the northeast, but they were from our town! They seemed to need friendship, and we prayed for them that night, for their marriage and their journeys.

A quite eccentric older lady was our next encounter, and she owned an art studio in a small Vermont town. Her son worked there with her, and she was super talkative...and ended up inviting us to climb the stairs to her big reveal that was happening the next day. She had been married to a man of status for years and they had attended big galas and events and parties, to which she wore big outfits...and I mean big! Boas, block heels 8 inches high, sequins and color and feathers and more! She told us the stories of the clothes, which she was now selling to the public. She was a bigger than life kind of person, maybe too big for some – but we found her interesting. And we listened, for a long time...and we still smile thinking about Rita.

One time during the week we washed our clothes at the cutest laundromat, thinking we'd do a puzzle book or read while waiting for the clothes to dry. But there was a widow woman there who lived alone and said she had very few friends, but she knew all about the little town where we were. She told us all about her life, where she'd lived, what to see while we were there, and she too never stopped talking. But it was nice to hear from her, and she seemed delighted to see us and chat. I'm thinking there weren't usually people there to talk to, when she came to wash. We talked and were interested in her, and it seemed to make her evening.

One last story was a couple – on their honeymoon – that we met while waiting to eat in a restaurant atop a high mountain after riding the gondola. We had been chatting with them in line, and when we found out they had just literally gotten married a few days before, well – that was fun! They ended up being seated at the table right next to us in the restaurant, and when we left I felt prompted to tell them we'd pray for them and their marriage. I have no idea why, but that young wife is still in my heart, and I thought they were the cutest couple. I hope and pray their marriage is blessed, always.

At home, in our busy lives, with our schedules and buying groceries and going here and there, I know that I get lost in all that busyness and fail to see those around me, much less sit and listen

or talk to them for a while. But I hope that this practice of finding encounters in every day will seep into my normal life instead of just being so prominent in our vacation life.

Encounters, it's what we were made for. First with Him, then with others. And they're most incredible when they're different, hilarious, tender, exciting, stirring – well, you get the picture. They're the icing on the cake of life.

## **FRESH THYME – Endings – by Marcy Lytle**

I dislike the ending of the weekend. Do you? I don't like that the fun of the two days off from work are now over and Monday arrives. There are all of the chores to get back to, bills to pay, the routine of making lunches and going to work, etc. and the fun of all the weekend activities has come to an end. Very often, I love to look back on the weekend at the end of it...and reflect on the fun we had. And sometimes, the weekends aren't so good, with not so pleasant surprises sprinkled in. I've found that when the end of something nears, I can either look back and focus on the good...or the bad...or both. And I can then choose to give thanks.

It's the end of a year, which is a great time to look back and think about what has transpired in our lives. For me, here is what comes to mind...good and not so good...

- We bought a new car in August which was fun. It's a Ford Bronco Sport and I'm in love with it.
- I fell and dislocated my shoulder in June which was unpleasant and painful. All is well, now.
- We traveled to Vermont in October and enjoyed the fall leaves, all the color and brilliance.
- I suffered a steam burn on my wrist when my teapot's lid fell off while I was pouring.
- In January, our kids took us away for the weekend to play, and it was amazingly wonderful.
- We met friends in April for the day, to play, eat, shop and visit, and we purposed to do it again.
- September 1 marked one year since my brother-in-law's death, and the grief is still real.
- My sister came for a visit in May and we had lots of fun, doing lots of things, amid the sadness.
- February was a quiet month of reflection and love and kiddos and family.
- We spent a few days with our kids and their kids at the best Airbnb ever, in July, so fun.
- It was 46 years we celebrated in March, of marriage, with a trip to Nashville.
- Last month in November, the government shut down, the world was still weary...and we prayed.
- This month, the ending month of the year, is just beginning, and...what lies ahead?

It's a good thing to take out our calendar and look back over 2025. In the middle of all the things we did and experienced, good and bad, we prayed and read the Word to find strength. We asked forgiveness when we messed up. We made mistakes and experienced His love and mercy. We struggled with age-old issues that pop up and cause us to sigh... All of life's ups and downs came and went, ebbed and flowed, began and ended.

As 2025 is closing, I want to purpose to look ahead to the beginning of a new year and look for surprises, notice the daily blessings, and pray and see answers...don't you? And maybe when Mondays appear on the calendar every week, I'll give thanks to the ending of a weekend well spent, and look forward to the next one, and the next...because life is seriously never ending...to those who believe.

## **FRESH THYME – Exhaustion – by Marcy Lytle**

Nothing is more exhausting than giving and giving of the best of your talents, and feeling frustrated and tired at the end of day and saying to yourself, “Am I doing enough? Does any of this really matter? Maybe I should be doing something else.” Day after day of questions and unfulfilled affirmations makes a body, mind and soul so weary. I know this firsthand.

I’ve always enjoyed writing. I recall in high school writing an essay about my dad and feeling so proud of the paper, and I made an excellent grade. In college, I had no problem writing papers. I wrote songs with lyrics from my soul, and I sang them with others. I wrote devotions for our family time and we made sure to do these at night, and I eventually wrote them all in a book which was published. And then another book, and another. So I’d say that one of my gifts is writing, which I really enjoy doing. Obviously, this magazine is an outlet for that!

But let me be honest. Sometimes, it’s exhausting when I do what I love but I feel tired when I do. In other words, I want those marks of good grades to appear on my talents even when there’s no teachers around anymore to give them! I want verbal affirmation from friends when they read, and of course I want my books to sell, and I love happy comments in our magazine, and from friends.

However, here’s the reality. Most affirmations and applause come from strangers, not my friends. Sometimes, there’s no accolades at all, except to know I’m using my writing in obedience to what I feel I’m supposed to do. There are millions upon millions of reading options in this world, from books written by celebrities because they have a “name” to books we can listen to in our ears, to hardbound novels that line shelves – oh my goodness – there are lots of words out there! So to have someone choose to listen or read my writings and the stories of the other women here on the pages of THYME – well maybe it’s like finding a needle in a haystack. Or I should say a nugget of gold in the sand!

My point is...when we constantly look for affirmation from others for the talents we bring to the table...we will always be exhausted.

People are human and fickle, and we are among them. If they notice our talents, cool. If not, still cool.

Others are looking for their own place in this world and their own accolades, so we can offer grace...

Talents we are re given to write, to paint, to be a mom, to engineer or create...they’re an offering to HIM.

He sees our offerings and He is pleased, always. And while we’d like him to audibly say to the world, “This is my daughter with this talent – I’m pleased – everyone clap now,” that’s not how serving in this world works. And serving doesn’t have to be exhausting...when we use our talents because they are gifts that we’re giving back with joy.

I’m preaching to myself here, because there are times when I think about stopping. Maybe I should just be gardening, volunteering, working in a retail shop, visiting friends, or a number of other things I could choose in life...but those too would be unfulfilling at times and exhausting.

One synonym for feeling exhausting is to feel weary. And the bible has a lot to say about feeling weary, and it's always followed by an invitation. *Come unto me if you're weary and heavy burdened...*recall that phrase? I do. And what follows is that He will give us rest.

I don't know what your talent is, but I bet you have many, and I bet you're exhausted sometimes. Maybe you do receive accolades for what you do, but it will never be enough because we then measure our worth by the numbers that applaud. Maybe you think your talent isn't good enough but you love to do whatever it is you do. So do it! Do it unto Him. Enjoy it. And when you grow tired, think about why and reset your mind to give thanks for the talents you have. Rest a while, regroup, and then get back to it.

Exhaustion replaced by rest. Sounds good, doesn't it? And you have the gifts that the world needs – we all do – so let's enjoy using them without a care in the world except knowing we're being obedient to the One who shined his light on us all, to then share that light with the world.

## FRESH THYME – Eyebrows – by Marcy Lytle

Eyebrows are interesting, aren't they? They show so much expression when their furrowed or raised, indicating how we feel about something around us. If they're too thick, we pluck them, and if they're too sparse, we fill them in. And everyone has eyebrows, a common lookalike quality in the human race.

I once had someone comment to me about my eyebrows years ago, and it was a comment that hurt my feelings. She noted that my eyebrows were unevenly filled in and I took it to mean that she disapproved and that I looked ugly. A simply stated observation resulted in a wounded heart. I look back and know that she didn't mean it that way, but it was the way I took it that made me sad.

What are other simple things that were said to me that stuck, in a negative ways?

I used to hear the phrase "there's no rest for the weary" as I was growing up, in the context of church work. And so I showed up (with my uneven eyebrows) and I smiled, I served, I volunteered, always and forever...until I couldn't because I was tired. And I found out that there is rest for the weary, lots of it. And it's okay to say no.

"An idle mind is the devil's workshop" was another phrase I heard when I was being prompted to stay busy, do my work, keep on going. Did the devil have a workshop in my mind? And how did he get that permission? Being idle is a bad thing? Surely, not. And I've since realized that while being idle for too long of course can cause issues, idling happens sometimes. To be idle means to be without purpose and lazy. And while a life of idleness is not good, there are plenty of lazy pointless days that do a world of good...to an otherwise active mind.

I remember as a young adult I thought about being a stewardess (flight attendant these days) because I loved flying, I would get airline points, and it just looked like a fun job. Someone said to me that being a stewardess was just a waitress in the sky, and they said it with a negative tone like being a waitress was a lowly ambition. It caused me pause, made me feel worthless, and I never pursued that job. I'm glad I didn't, but I may have enjoyed it for a while, who knows? I won't ever know because I let those words destroy an idea.

There are countless things people say in passing and don't mean a thing by them. They can be simple words they've heard before, just an observation they're making, or they might sometimes be strong words of disapproval.

I've never ever forgotten the eyebrow comment to me and I think of it often when I get dressed and put on my makeup. And then one day, years later, I heard a makeup artist say that your eyebrows are sisters, not twins. Well, how about that! They don't have to be perfectly alike, now do they? And that released the ill effect of the first words mentioned about my eyebrows.

My offering to you this month is to reverse the effects of phrases you've taken as your own, ones that have hurt you to the core, and turn them around.

Forgive the one who said it

Rise up in confidence in who you are

Replace those words with the truth – you are loved, you can rest, and you are beautiful

Whatever wounds you're carrying, or mistakes you've thought you made – from simple eyebrows to bad career choices – let them go and give them to Him. Ask Him to open your eyes to see who you are in him, and you'll find yourself lighter, happier and more beautiful to your own eyes, as you head out the door.