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Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

December 2023



TIPS

The Dressing – Cozy Mornings – by Marcy Lytle

It's December...about to be winter...and Christmas is this month. We all love being cozy on Christmas morning, all throughout the holidays and on into the new year! I love buying new pajamas and slippers, but often I put it off and don't. However, this year I did get a few new things I'll share with you and where to find them!

A Dressy Set – Marshalls is a great place to find cute pajamas that aren't super expensive at all. Both sets I'm sharing here were \$19.99! This lux black set has such pretty detail (see the hem of the pants!) and the black is so elegant – a great choice for Christmas morning! Or to pack for a winter getaway.

Christmas stripes – This packaged pair of pajamas is Lucky Brand and was also found at Marshalls. Oh my goodness, they're soft and comfortable. I always size up on pajamas to get that comfortable loose fit, because who wants to sleep in tight fitting pants? Not me!

New slippers – What are you wearing on your feet in the cold mornings? I've bought this style of slipper more than once, from Old Navy. I love the classic look, they're nice enough to wear outside, and they're pretty and super warm. If you're in between sizes, size up. They run barely a bit small.

The slip-ons you need – I saw these circulating and I grabbed a pair because they're cute, they're back, and I can wear them with cozy socks. They have a sole, so that can be worn anywhere! They're cute with jeans, or just wearing around the house, or even out shopping! Super comfortable.

Blanket Wrap – That's all I know to call this cozy wrap found at World Market. Do you ever look there for clothes? They have great options and often run a great sale, as well! This is last year's wrap, but they have new ones!

The Set – You've probably seen them. Sets – top and bottom same color – and super soft and cozy. Have I written cozy enough times for you already? I found this cargo sweatpant at Walmart, and the long oversized shirt as well. It's black. And with a scarf and a tote, I can wear it out...or in!

A New Robe – Still wearing that robe from the late 90's? Time for a new one, and I found the softest one ever at World Market. And it's a men's robe! I loved the green plaid, so I thought why not? I put it on in the morning and never want to take it off.

So check your local discount stores, stop in World Market, or look at Walmart and see what you find to make your winter cozy...

Seven for You – That Special Gift – by the Panel

There's always a gift or two or three, but usually not more than that, ones we keep forever. And we keep them because they're specially made, have meaning behind them, they're handmade, or they just make us happy. We asked our panel to share their favorite gift from times past, to share with us a photo, and tell us why they still have this gift...and why it means so much to them. I bet you have one as well. Please feel free to share in the comments!

This pin was one of hundreds my Nannie and Great Nannie made for the war effort in World War 2. Many were sold here in the United States. They would sit in front of the radio and listen to Winston Churchill speak and make them. Sometimes their work was halted during air raids but they kept at it every free minute they could. It's a symbol of my family's strength that I cherish. – Cathy

One of my favorite gifts is a spoon rest that my oldest granddaughter, Katie, made for me when she was little. The spoon rest is white ceramic, which she painted. It's been in my kitchen since she gave it to me in September, 2006 when she was 10 years old. I love everything about it, even her name on the back. - Debbie

I think the gifts that have meant the most to me have been the handmade gifts my children gave me when they were young. Most are boxed up now but I know when I go through those boxes, they bring me smiles. The gifts may not just be for Christmas but other holidays, too. Now I get all happy when I receive a handmade picture or card from my grandkids. I received a sweet thank you from my grandson Cole and Addison painted me these two pictures. I have sweet notes from Millie and Moses too! I also have sweet memories of when we have all been able to be together at Christmas with little ones - I think the joy we see on their faces when they open a present is just priceless! - Melissa

I have a bowl that a work friend's daughter made from rope, for me, at a lunch we had with co-workers. I think it's so special because I have only met that young lady a few times, and she took lots of time to craft me this beautiful bowl I will always cherish. I'm probably 30 years or more her senior, so I'm not a peer. I'm not someone she's known forever, and I have no idea why she gave it to me...but it warmed my heart...and always will. – Marcy

Many years ago, I took care of an elderly lady I found broken down in her car in the middle of the road. She called herself an "orphan" because she had no family left. She was an "oops" baby, born many years after her two brothers. Her brothers didn't have children. Her parents died. She (her name was Patricia, and she went by "Pat") did get married and had one boy who was killed in a tornado when he was 7yrs old. That tragic accident ruined her marriage and it ended in divorce, so she had no family left. She was kind of a bitter old lady, not very nice to her neighbors. I took care of her until she died, and only ONE person outside of my family attended her funeral. She had lived through the depression, so she was extremely particular about her possessions and saved wayyyy toooooo many things. When she was forced to move to a nursing home, I hired an estate sale company to liquidate her possessions, which was very painful for her. But some items were too precious to sell, and she made me take them to the nursing home to keep with her until she died. She made me promise to never sell the items. So now I have (and use) her mother's gold wedding band. The inscription inside says "P to H 3-13-10" which stands for Peter to Hazel and they were married on March 13th, 1910. Her father was an avid gardener and a railroad engineer (drove the trains), and I loved hearing her stories

about him. The other item that I was forced to keep (not sentimental at all to me, but I can't dishonor her by throwing them away) are numbered specialty plates that have Dachshund dogs on them. She had those kinds of dogs as pets until she got too old to care for them properly. There are about 9-12 collector plates and they are in my attic. If you know anyone who would treasure them, I'd love to give them away. Until then...the attic it is! – Laura

It is interesting how small items can bring you back to a place and time in your past. When I was in my early 20's I worked at a daycare center. I loved little ones and was hoping to have my own someday. The family of a little boy in my class gave me a gift of a beautiful little bud vase. I have kept it all these years and it brings back lovely memories. Another item that I have kept for many years is a small wall hanging with an encouraging saying on it. It was given to me when I graduated from high school by one of my youth pastors. It was encouraging because life after graduation always presents unexpected situations. But, this little wall hanging reminds me of all the hope of that period of time in my life. It also encourages me to "carry on," even when I am waiting on the answer. - Gina

At Christmastime, my husband goes shopping for gifts for me. He buys whatever he sees that makes him think of me. These are extra gifts because I've already picked out the presents I want. They may be wonderful, or they may be strange, but whatever they are, they're special because he thought of me, for some reason, when he saw them.

One Christmas, years ago, I received this blanket. We have many blankets, so I was surprised he got it for me. He said it made him think of me. It's not the blanket I would've ever picked because it's white and plush. I was afraid of it shedding. But it doesn't and I love it! It's so soft and warm! It was a wonderful gift. And it's my own personal blanket.

A strange gift I received one Christmas is this little stuffed Ty Beanie Boos dragon. I can only wonder how my husband saw me in this, but I love it! I loved it the moment I opened it. I don't know why. It's a strange gift, a stuffed animal toy. I keep it on my desk, and I look at it all the time. Maybe it's special because my husband saw it and thought of me. It makes me think of him. Or maybe it's true that we all still have a child deep down inside of us. - Carole

And something too funny:

At our first "married" Christmas together, and for most Christmases for many years to come, my late husband of 46 years, Jim, and my brother-in-law, Bob, who were best friends, went Christmas shopping together for my sister and me. If I got a nighty, my sister got a nighty; a leather coat? We both got one (just like our parents did, come to think of it!) Well, one year, my husband picked out a 'western' style pantsuit for me; it was glorious! NOT. Solid off-white pebbled polyester pants and top, with brown suede trim and FRINGE across the front and back of the top! I thought it was hideous, and he thought it was fabulous! Thankfully, it didn't fit so I had to return it--but we chose something a little less 'swingy.' - Debbie

Cousin Moms

Christmas morning and the days leading up to it can be so magical for the kids, and each family has its own traditions and ways of planning, gifting, eating, and all the things. It's sometimes hard to slow down and focus on the true meaning of the birth of Jesus, but all of the things we do as parents can surround that amazing Gift and enhance the actual day we celebrate Christmas together. We asked the moms to share their own Christmas Day with their family and give us a peek into their homes...

Kamrin

We love Christmas and all of the traditions! We usually start the Saturday after Thanksgiving. On that day, we take the entire day and get our tree. Each kid picks an ornament, we put up lights and make cookies. I almost love tree trimming as much as Christmas Day!

After that's done, we typically do an advent leading up to Christmas. As the kids have gotten older, we found a wooden tree that has the family tree of Christ. You start with Adam Eve and read up to the birth of Jesus. We are looking for an advent study to do with the kids – since the kids are older. We want them to understand that the birth of Christ is important to the story of knowing Christ totally. I am hoping to do this! It will be new.

On Christmas Day, it's simple at our house. No rushing, which is important to us. We are always busy, so that day we are NOT. The holiday season is our time to slow down. We let the kids sleep in, but we just let them wake up whenever. Once they're up, we do a waffle bar. That's become our breakfast tradition on Christmas morning. It's so easy. I just make waffles (they're easy to reheat) and set out toppings.

Opening gift, we start youngest to oldest and we take our time. Lunch is then charcuterie, which is easy to put out. We can nibble, and I don't have to be cooking! And in the afternoon, when we're done, we sometimes watch a movie, go outside if the weather is good, and enjoy our gifts.

Later in the day, we do stockings and enjoy dinner. Sometimes it's soup in a crockpot. And then we watch a Christmas movie and hang out!

We try to stick to a budget with our gifts, and we try to do a certain number, whether we spend a lot or not. We also have added little tiny stockings for our pets! It's so fun.

We also love to add something new when we can. I'm so grateful to be able to create memories, and teach the kids the heart of Christ – being grateful and giving back. They clean out their rooms and give or donate the things. It's not just a holiday, but a reminder of who we are in HIM, and to prepare our hearts for the New Year.

Some years it's crazy and we've struggled to do advent and stay focused, but we can all take a deep breath and do what we can – enjoy the little things!

Charissa

Christmas traditions have definitely changed since I was a child to then being in high school, college, getting married and now having kids! We've also lived in different areas. Our kids are now ages 7, 5 and 10 months old...so it's just a joyous season to celebrate! We've combined our traditions from our owl childhood plus added a few new.

One tradition from my childhood is that on Christmas morning we open one gift at a time. I did that growing up at my granny's house, and I love being able to spend the time and enjoy the reaction to every gift. My husband wasn't used to this at first, as each person opened all their gifts and it was all over in 45 minutes when he was a kid! We now enjoy opening one at a time, and this definitely requires patience for the girls.

Another thing we do is enjoy a chocolate advent calendar. My aunt used to give us one, so I now give my girls one to open throughout December.

My husband's traditions that we've kept include staying home Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to be with our kids. One thing he enjoyed was having Christmas brunch at his papaw's house. So we do gather or host a brunch with scrambled eggs, pork tenderloin and biscuits for a big breakfast!

One new thing we've started is we have a birthday party for Jesus on Christmas Day, which entails baking a birthday cake for Jesus. The girls pick out the type of cake with me at the store, usually vanilla with rainbow or pink icing. We read the story of Jesus' birth and the reason for Christmas Day, and we sing Happy Birthday to Jesus. This helps us key in on the true meaning of the holiday.

We also try to find a different advent we can read through together every year, leading up to Christmas, enjoying every moment of the season.

In the Kitchen – Fa La La La Fast – by Marcy Lytle

I'm sure many of us are already tired of baking and cooking, because Thanksgiving is still right behind us. So the thought of baking and making more, although oh so fun, leaves us wanting to skip making dinner for our families at all. After all, creating Christmas goodies is so fun. But then starting up the stove and the oven, and pulling out the bowls for dinner too...well that's just too much!

There are ways to have items and ideas on hand, for quick meals that are fast and yet tasty. So we're offering help for you and yours, so that you can enjoy the other fun stuff that the holiday brings:

Mad Dash Mixes – Order your stash today. I have not eaten one of these meals that has not been delicious to the max and SO EASY. We recently had the chili last month, and the flavor – my goodness! I've mentioned these mixes multiple times in stories in this magazine, so I can't say enough how nice they are to have so many of their packets on hand for the holidays. From the dips to the soups to the pasta mixes, and more! (soup and chili photos)

World Market finds – Did you know that World Market has shelves of charcuterie items all waiting for you to pick up and take home? From little rounds of already sliced cheese, to salami rounds, to really cute and yummy crackers, olives, seasonings and more. Shop and make your own shelf full of these goodies, and let the kids make the board one night for the family for dinner! Add fruit, nuts and dark chocolate too – have these on hand. You're done!

Harvest Salad – My goodness this is good, and easy. It called for Kale but I used broccoli and whatever I had for the greens. Then I tossed in all the rest – and the dressing was a cinch as well! Hearty, tasty and good. Another meal the kids could throw together if you're over on the other side of the kitchen baking and decorating for those gatherings you're attending!

Preheat oven to 400 degrees F

Butternut squash (I buy one of the packaged cubes)

- 1 T olive oil
- ½ t kosher salt
- ¼ t black pepper

(toss together and place on baking sheet in a single layer – then roast about 30 minutes)

The dressing – for a shortcut, buy one that has a mustard taste or let the kids whisk this together:

Minced garlic, 1 T whole grain mustard, ½ t kosher salt, ¼ t pepper, 1 T apple cider vinegar, ¼ c olive oil

The salad

- 4 cups chopped curly kale (I chopped a head of broccoli instead)

- 1 romaine heart chopped
- 2 honeycrisp apples diced
- ¼ c chopped red onion
- ¼ c chopped pecans
- 1/3 c pumpkin seeds
- ¼ c dried cranberries
- ¼ crumbled goat cheese (I crumbled what I had and that was cheddar slices)
- 1 c cornbread croutons (I just ate crackers with it)

Combine all of that in a bowl, with the roasted squash, and add the dressing and toss. Enjoy. This recipe was included because you can really just use what you have – nuts, greens, seeds, etc. to make this toss and go salad.

Tiny pot pies - We made this for the kids last time they came over. I saw it on Instagram and it was super easy, I even had the mix in the fridge so I could just pop in the tins when it was ready to be baked. Individual pot pies – the best!

- 2 tubes Canned biscuits
- 1 can cream of chicken soup
- 1 pkg veggie medley (steamed in the microwave)
- 1 diced cooked chicken (I had some cooked sausage and used it!)

Spray the muffin tin with spray, then press in the biscuits to make cups. Fill with the mixture of the above stirred ingredients. Bake at 350 degrees for 20-30 minutes.

Sorbet Fruit Cups – If you have a Costco membership or if someone you know does, grab this huge box of desserts for the family to grab when they're hungry. They're cute, so tasty, and filling! Great to have on hand for guests, too!

Chocolate chip pumpkin bread – Do you follow Brunch with Babs on Instagram? You should! This is the easiest pumpkin bread recipe ever...with the shortcut of using a cake mix. Try it. Add the chocolate chips. Let the family enjoy.

- 1 can pumpkin puree
- 1 package spice cake mix
- 2 beaten eggs
- 1 cup chocolate chips

Mix first three ingredients, then add the chocolate. Spray loaf pan and spread batter into pan. Bake at 350 degrees for 40 minutes. Test bread for doneness.

Pretty Chef's Salad – A salad that's easy. But you can also make it pretty!

- Greens
- Tomatoes
- Cucumbers

- Boiled eggs (optional)
- Red onion
- Turkey (thinly sliced)
- Cheese (sandwich slices – American)
- Honey Mustard dressing

Standard ingredients for a salad, right? But consider rolling the cheese slices on a turkey slice, then cutting that roll into rounds. It looks SO pretty on top of the salad!

Don't feel bad if you end up in the drive-thru, or you DoorDash a few times, or even just pile up and go out to eat. But if you're home and need something quick, just think of your favorite quick fixes, includes some of the above, and don't forget the best – tuna sandwiches and Fritos. YUM.

Happy Holidays.

SUGAR + Spice A Few of My Favorite Things – by Angela Dolbear

“Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens...” No doubt that song from the *Sound of Music* is playing in your mind when we hear the phrase “a few of my favorite things.” I like roses and kittens for sure, but I’m a true-blue cosmetics connoisseur, so here is my year-end wrap-up list of a few of my favorite products. Some products are long-time loves, and some are new to my beauty routine. Enjoy!

LIPS – [Buxom Full-On Plumping Lip Polish](#) -- I always have at least two different tubes of this lip gloss in my handbag. It’s long lasting, not sticky, slightly plumping and the shades are all lovely.

HAIR – [Bondi Boost Intensive Spray Daily Serum](#) – I purchased this spray to help with my on-going pursuit to find products to help me regrow and maintain my hair. I spray it on my roots as directed, and comb through to the rest of my hair. My hair looks and feels so much healthier, and it helps control frizz. I’m also a big fan of the Bondi Boost shampoo and conditioner.

NAILS – [OPI RapiDry Spray Nail Polish Dryer](#) – After I finish painting my nails, I give them a generous spraying and it sets my polish, levels out any clumpy-ness, and speeds drying time. I’m never without this spray.

EYE SHADOW – [ColourPop Super Shock in “2014”](#) – I’ve been a big fan of the Super Shock shadows for a while now, but the shade “2014” is a multi-use eye-brightening shade. I use it as a shadow base, and then swipe a darker matte shadow in the crease of my eyelid and blend upwards. It has fine pin-point glitter which brightens my eyes and adds soft glamour.

MASCARA – [Lancôme Lash Idôle Mascara](#) – I received a sample of this mascara, and hesitated to use it, since the last time I used Lancôme mascara I had serious raccoon-eyes just an hour later! But I gave it a chance and I loved it. It lengthens and thickens my lashes without being clumpy, and it stays put all day.

SETTING POWDER -- [Urban Decay All Nighter Waterproof Setting Powder](#) – When my make-up is complete, I like to dust my face with setting powder. UD’s Allnighter powder isn’t cakey, and it doesn’t sit in my wrinkles. It sets my make-up and gives it an overall even finished look.

FOUNDATION – [Smashbox Halo Healthy Glow Tinted Moisturizer Broad Spectrum SPF 25](#) – I wanted to try this tinted moisturizer for a long time. When it appeared 50% off in Ulta’s “26 Days of Savings” sale, I jumped on it. I love that it came in a shade for olive skin. Being of Sicilian ancestry I have a light olive cast to my skin. Not only is the shade perfect, but it gives my skin light coverage that doesn’t settle into my wrinkles or pores and leaves my skin with a light glow. I love that it also has SPF 25 sun protection.

The beauty of blessings to you!

Angela Dolbear, Beauty Editor, is the author of contemporary spiritual novels, such as [THE GARDEN KEY](#) Series, and [THE TORMENTOR’S TALE](#), as well as many short stories, which are available in paperback, Kindle and audiobook formats on [Amazon](#). And she loves writing and recording songs with her husband, Tim --listen on [Sound Cloud](#). She is also a self-proclaimed beauty junkie and has been since long before her mother allowed her to start wearing makeup at the age of 14. She keeps UPS and

the USPS busy delivering small boxes on a regular basis from Ulta, Sephora, Amazon, and many independent cosmetics companies to her home Nashville, TN. Please connect with her at www.AngelaDolbear.com

Tried and True – Last Month’s Learning

Every month I’m amazed at what is new out there...if we look and listen. Always learning, I hope! Here are this month’s ideas and thoughts and things. Hope you find them as interesting as I do!

Have you ever considered using puzzle glue to then frame your puzzle and hang? We did for the fall, and it would be so fun to do one each season!

Bento Boxes. I show them in my Instagram stories. Consider them as a gift for yourself or for your family members that are always on the go! They’re actually fun to pack!

Did you know you can make your own honey mustard dressing if you have honey and yellow mustard in your cabinet? Just mix honey in the mustard – to taste. It’s the best!

There’s a book I pull out often in the fall/winter on ways to wear a scarf. You might need it.

Lots of family gatherings make for bored kiddos. Snap photos on your phone of things super close up and let them guess what they are. Make sure you have the photo of the item normally, too, to show them. Works great at a restaurant or just while you wait...anywhere. Kids love it!

We have lawn chairs that have roofs! We often get asked about them. They’re Kelsyus brand on Amazon and have roofs that then fold down and wrap the chair, for carrying. Great idea for those that are in the thick of busyness with sports, right now.

Have you seen the sorbet cups at Costco in the freezer section? They’re GREAT for guests and kids, and for that quick dessert you need that looks amazing, as well. Sorbet in real fruit cups – seriously awesome. We even added this on the In the Kitchen column, too!

If you want to try your hand at a new dish this season, have you ever made or eaten a Runza? They’re in several states as a fast food restaurant, and we just had one in Nebraska. Here’s a recipe if you want to try!

We saw pumpkins instead of flowers in hanging baskets this fall. I’m thinking you could try that with Christmas balls of all sizes as well! In fact, I did!

Ever heard of a crazy quilt? Look it up! They’re beautifully made and part of our history.

Do you have a collection of pens, or other small items you’re not sure what to do with? Try them as wall art! Or not... This photo is a collection of pens donated to this 50’s diner and they covered the wall with them!

Just in case you’re looking for a new calendar for 2024, check the Paper Source. I got one I love of US Cities!

If you’re moving wreaths outside from hanging on your walls, be careful. A nest might be hiding in it! Yes, it was in mine.

Have you tried persimmons? I had never, so I bought some at the market. Hope I like them! And if you have an old bread pan you don't use, place your fruit inside to store in the fridge. I tried persimmon bread, it was easy, and super yum.



HOME

Practical Parenting – Family Horrors – by Marcy Lytle

If you're a parent or have been around littles, you've had the experience of what I call family "horror" maybe multiple times. Your family shows up for Christmas and one of the aunts or uncles or grandparents tries to talk with your kids and they shy away, or make a face or even worse...they slap the loving family member. You want to run and hide and go back home with these shameful kids, but you have to stay and face the music...

Toddlers embarrass us and people are forgiving (for the most part) when said toddler turns away, slaps or pitches a fit when we try to make them say hello or offer a hug to family during the holidays. But the older kids, if they sneer or slunk away, well that's a different story. Family is offended right away by the lack of attention and love that's not reciprocated when everyone is supposed to be cheery and bright.

Even at our best parenting; our kids are just not going to interact perfectly all the time, and the horror of explaining their rude behavior leaves some parents with nightmares!

There really are no sure-fire ways to stave off the family horrors over the holidays, but there are a few things to consider that will help with some. They all start with T!

Tired kids can't be expected to perform well. After all, neither can we! If possible, make sure kids are well rested and have slept and are happy upon waking, well fed, and all the things. Sleepy kiddos become kiddos that frown quickly and react ugly.

Talk to the kiddos before arriving. Maybe instead of demanding that they perk up and be nice, we can ask them how they feel about going. Talk to them about how it makes them feel if their friends turn away or aren't nice when they come to visit, and how it makes the family feel SO GOOD when we are loving and kind.

Treat the kids with kindness. In other words, if they see us hurried and harried and griping about who we're going to see and how we can't stand this person or that, the kids are going to pick up on those attitudes. And they don't have the adult skills to "fake it" like we do. Yes, I've done that a time or two!

Train them. It doesn't hurt to talk about manners and etiquette with all of the kids, no matter their age. Imitate inappropriate behavior and then demonstrate the good. Remind them of eye contact, how family members love hugs, to say thank you after being given a gift, and eating with their mouths closed, and being kind to cousins. Actually talk about things before you go, instead of just expecting the kids to know.

Trust God to direct you and keep you all, even in the most difficult of family circumstances. Perhaps there are annoying family members and weird ones and even scary ones, but you have to show up. Pray together as a family for peace and protection and love, and then go in that trust of the One who loves you all.

The holidays are hard sometimes, even at home with the immediate family. Kids fight and show disappointment if a sibling's gift is bigger than theirs. Yes, our kids look for the biggest package before we start opening!

The wonder of Christmas is amazing and fun, with little ones. But the horrors of reality can set us reeling if we're not careful. Don't let them. Even if you mind all your T's, there will be meltdowns and rude gestures...from the kids and maybe the adults! Let the joy of the season cause you to snicker and erupt into laughter when you're alone back in your room away from what just happened...

Tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la la...la la la la.

I Don't Do Teenagers – The Gifts – by Marcy Lytle

What do teens want for Christmas? Well, one thing's for sure. They're no longer asking for cheap toys and they're no longer wishing for things that are easy to find, and sometimes they don't even know what they want! And then...they want something way expensive. But if we get that – they will get nothing else! Christmas can cause angst for the parents of teens, for sure. So we thought we'd put together a list of ideas, in case you need inspiration in this area, this season:

1. Earbuds – there are fancy ones and fancy cases and all the things. So if they listen to music, consider a cool pair.
2. Sneakers – My goodness, there are lots of choices. Ask them to choose a few styles they love, and then you pick a pair and surprise them. Or let them shop and pick a pair, you wrap and place under the tree. They'll still be delighted that they got to choose!
3. Coziness – Teens love to be cozy, so maybe their own oversized and soft blanket or a new pair of slippers. Walmart has some of the best!
4. The Cube is back – There are SO MANY Rubik's cube variations out there, and they're a great gift for the one who fidgets or is anxious or just likes to manipulate! Try the shape shifting box!
5. Do your teens have a portable charger? Since the kids are always on their phones, they'd love this gift to keep their phone alive...
6. Keepsake – Maybe she'd like a Kendra Scott pendant. Or he'd love a cap from his favorite team.
7. Scrunchies – Did you know there are now hair scrunchies with hidden zipper pockets to carry cash? How cool!
8. Something old-fashioned – like a retro alarm clock or radio to place beside their bed! Or how about a film camera!
9. An event – Find tickets to a movie or sporting event and place these tickets in a box to place under the tree!
10. A cool water bottle – if they like stickers, grab a sheet for them to use to decorate their new bottle.
11. Young teens (and maybe even the older ones) love Squishmallows. And there are tons to choose from!
12. How about a 3D pen for the one who loves to draw!

I love a good list to look at and spark ideas! Gift cards are nice, but often tossed aside and never used. Clothing for teens is risky unless they pick it out ahead of time – now that works! If your teens have struggles making a list or their list is ridiculously expensive, talk to the kids about Christmas. Explain how this Christmas will be and how we are all thankful for anything someone else thinks of to give us, no matter the cost.

Words of affirmation are a great gift to give, in the form of cards hidden in the tree, or personal notes inside each gift.

And finally, a new Bible is a treasure. Personalize it. Get one that has notes, add a pen and a bible cover, but always give the gift of the Word in some form. That's the best gift of all...

An Adage a Day - Top Notch - by Carole Gilbert

I had a sweet friend ask me if I knew about a certain phrase. I didn't think this certain phrase would be good for December. I thought it might be good for January, but something led me to look it up anyway. The more I researched the more I knew Top Notch was perfect for December! Isn't that just like our God?

This phrase has several thoughts concerning its origin of meaning but it is known to have started in America in the mid 1800's. It could have started with sports, especially hurdles and moving the bar to its top position, or possibly with climbing mountains to their top. And another, more plausible, thought about where its meaning came from is carpentry work.

Carpenters used to make a notch on the top of the best pieces of wood to distinguish them from the others. Hence, the phrase, "Top notch," was created. It refers to something or someone being the best or having the highest standards. We all have top notch people and moments in our lives. I can think of many in mine. One moment was watching my daughter place a track medal on my son. She was the mascot of the cheerleading team so sometimes they got to do special activities like on this day, placing the medals on the winners. What made this moment even more top notch was she wanted to do this for her brother. Family is extremely top notch to me. And my daughter showed how much she loved her brother (even though they don't always act like it!)

But the most top notch moment in my life was the moment I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior! In fact, that's what made me think of this phrase being top notch for Christmas because Jesus is top notch, and He was a carpenter. I'm sure He used the best quality of materials available to Him; but more than that, I know HE was the best at whatever He did, whether it was carpentry or something else. Jesus was and is top notch! I don't know if there are words to express how much Jesus is the best. He is the highest and He came from the highest place. He has the most. The most of everything one could possibly want the most of. And He is the greatest. The greatest of everything and especially the greatest of love. He loves us with everything He has. I don't know about you, but He must be top notch to love and put up with me!

Back in Biblical days, the rulers often had their title of authority inscribed on their robes. But none could claim the reach of expansion Jesus has.

Revelation 19:16 says,

On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Jesus is the highest of all kings and all lords of all times! He is the top notch of everyone, forevermore.

So, as we celebrate this special time of the year, let's remember who is top notch and the top notch reason for the season.

And back to my friend that gave me the idea for this phrase, she's pretty top notch too! Thank you, Marcy!

In Each Room – The Metal Cabinet – by Marcy Lytle

It really is my best friend in my home – the metal cabinet in the garage. I even now have two. These two items give me peace of mind, order my chaos, and bring me joy. What better gift to give yourself than something like that! So if you have one, start organizing if you haven't already. If you don't have one, get one...or two!

My metal cabinets store all of my table décor, because I love to decorate and serve on seasonal items. My house has no room for these things. And when they were in the kitchen cabinets among all of the everyday items, they got lost and never used. But having the metal cabinet that is designated just for seasonal tableware and table décor has been such a joy!

Take everything out.

If you have a junky space, that's the first thing to do. I laid out every item and made piles, for winter, Valentines, Easter, spring, summer, picnics, fall, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas. This enabled me to see what I had, how big it was, and what bins I needed.

Use what you have.

I was going to buy a bunch of new bins before I started, but I decided to wait. And I'm glad I did. I had bins in the garage that were empty, all sizes, and some in the house. And they all worked, without me having to buy a new thing at all!

Start from the beginning.

I began placing each season's tableware and goodies in order from January through December.

I had some filing bins that held pretty melamine plates I collect!

I had plastic kitchen bins that held breakables and small plates and votives.

A refrigerator bin was perfect for folded mats and tablecloths.

A large collapsible bin enabled me to stand up all my decorative trays so they're easy to flip through when I need one.

Placemats lay flat, so they just stacked in a nice pile.

Season by season and holiday by holiday, it all went back in.

I can't tell you how pleased I was (and still am) when this cabinet was complete. This is a once or twice a year activity I do, to organize and make this space usable, uncluttered and such a happy place to open up and look inside once Christmas rolls around again...

What's the favorite organizational piece in your garage?

A Night to Remember – Perspective – by Marcy Lytle

Perspective is our point of view, and it seems to vary so much between person to person, even though we think others ought to have our same perspective...always. Kids might not know what the word means, but a little lesson and encouragement about perspective...along with a bit of fun...is good for the souls!

Preparation: Take about five photos with your iphone so the picture is distorted. Then take the photo normally. Keep these saved and labeled to use for the devo! Here are five suggestions: a tree ornament, the kitchen faucet, a doorknob, a candle, and thumb. And five ways to snap the photo: too close up, too far away, filtered and messed up, the item is behind and hidden, and finally the light is off in the room so the photo is dark.

Here are our verses for this study, this December:

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." (Matthew 7:3-5).

Sometimes we see something that we think everyone else should see the same. In this story, a guy was looking at his neighbor and telling him about a speck of dust in the neighbor's eye. But the guy had a huge log in his own eye! So how could he see properly what the other guy had in his eye?

Here's another example: What if you saw dot of mustard on your brother's shirt and began to tease about being a slob, but you had a HUGE blob of ketchup on your own shirt? Wouldn't that be silly to criticize your brother?

We're going to look at five photos that are distorted, or out of focus, or not in clear view, and we're going to guess what the picture is. Then we will see the real photo. Each time, we will talk about perspective, and how our point of view matters, so we need to be careful that we don't criticize others.

Show the first distorted photo and let the kids guess what it is, then show the photo normally, after each example below.

The first photo is taken too close up in order to see clearly. If we get in other kids' faces and we're angry or mad, our perspective is off. Anger causes us to see unclearly and act rudely.

This second photo was taken far away. Can you see what the photo is supposed to be? If we don't know all of the reasons behind a friend's behavior, we are too far away to judge them. Maybe a friend isn't friendly, but what we don't know is that their grandparent is sick. Not knowing or being close to the situation gives us a skewed perspective.

This third photo we used a filter and added effects, which then ruined the photo altogether. Filters are like fake cover-ups when we don't want others to see the real thing. Maybe a friend

acts out, speaks loudly, or hits others...but that kid is really, really sad inside. Their filter tries to hide their pain, and our perspective is just, "They're mean."

The fourth photo, you cannot see the object because it's hiding behind a bigger one. Sometimes kids are bullied by others and they hide from that bully. We might see them as weak, but perhaps they were hurt. We can offer grace, instead of judging them through what we think we see.

This last photo was taken in the dark. It's impossible to see well without light. The light of God shines on our hearts, on all of us. And if we're peering into the dark, we can never have a good perspective at all...because one cannot see in the dark.

Perspective is a big deal. People thought Jesus was going to come as a king, but he came as a lowly baby lying on a bed of straw. Many let their perspective, or point of view, keep them from seeing the love of God sent to the world to save us all.

Family prayer: *Lord, forgive us when we judge others through our eyes that aren't seeing clearly for all sorts of reasons. Help us to only look at the stain on our own clothes and not on others. And thank you for coming to this world, for being our Savior. We pray for all people that don't know your love. Help us to see them through your eyes, through the light of your love, and bring them to faith in you.*

Tiny Living – Next, A Cow – by Leyanne Enterline

Living tiny means limited fridge space! I've mentioned before that our tiny trailer does not have a full size fridge. It's a little larger than those ones we get in a hotel room. And ours does come with a tiny freezer and we have a very tiny outdoor fridge. I feel like I'm still playing "house" like when I was little and had a Suzy Bake Oven. Remember those? My kitchen appliances have been slightly upgraded to about the size a high schooler would need if living on their own. But we manage!

Again, I'm thankful that my parents are down the road because any large items or anything extra that I can't fit in my tiny spaces can go into one of their many freezers! I'm glad they share their space!

The indoor fridge we have can fit food for about a week. There's definitely no room for stocking up items...which I wish I could do, especially when things go on sale. But that's just impossible. Some products like mustard or BBQ sauce can stay in the door of the fridge; but otherwise, we are moving through the perishable foods within that week to restock again every Monday.

The outdoor fridge holds extra water bottles for all those baseball games for the boys, and we like to have some Zevia sodas and Maine Root on hand for when friends come, and we want some special treats. Now with my oldest son's lure-making hobby, this fridge also holds some items that he needs for that, and some of my gardening liquids. So this outdoor fridge also stays pretty packed.

All of this talk about how stuffed the refrigerators are started me thinking of ways to open up some space. So my next project for next spring is to get some chickens! We have a few trips planned out for the rest of this year, but once January comes around we're staying home for a bit. And I'm gonna get my chicken game planning on!

We have the outdoor space. I just need to read up on keeping chickens and get the area ready for them. We typically try to keep a few containers of eggs in the fridge, which does take up a lot of the fridge space. My thought was if I can get some fresh eggs (from what I read) I don't have to refrigerate them for a bit. And we go through them so quickly, that should work out great!

I'm also growing cilantro, kale, spinach, jalapeños, and herbs. And I'm working on a lemon tree, and some other produce that I cut off as needed, so that I don't have to keep them in the fridge like I do when I buy them from the store. I think I'm trying to "homestead." I feel like I live on the set of *Little House on the Prairie*...though I have nowhere near their expertise. But I'm trying!

Next, a cow....

Remember love grows best in tiny spaces



YOU

Under Pressure - Four Christmases – by Debbie Haynes

Four Christmases without him. Celebrating anything is so hard without my soulmate, helpmate, spiritual mate, my lifemate. 46 years of being together, working, loving, raising kids, growing in God, pastoring and just living life together was not always easy, but it always good.

But, when your life partner dies just eight weeks before Christmas, it changes literally everything about the season. That first year, so raw and alone, I had no heart to celebrate, not to put up a tree, not to decorate the house or anything else. The kids encouraged me to, but I just couldn't. For one thing, all my decorations were stored in the attic of the house which my husband had built 20 years prior. He frequented the attic as needed, but I'd never even been inside of it.

God is so mindful of us, especially in our times of despair. Proverbs tell us that there is a time and a season for everything; even a time to look for something lost, and a time to stop looking and accept the loss.

About three weeks before that first Christmas without him, when I didn't want to even think about a tree, the Lord healed a little spot in my heart. It was enough so that my passion for celebrating the birth of Jesus, Who truly is the reason for the season, was sparked as well as the tradition of and my passion for, sewing hand-made gifts at Christmastime. And, I began thinking, maybe I'll just try to find some little something that's Christmassy, but really easy to make.

And I did! I printed out a free, on-line pattern by Rebecca Page, and I made myself, and all my loved ones, stuffed Christmas trees out of Christmas fabrics and I stuffed their branches so full that they stood up nice and straight.

I made myself three, in varied heights and sizes, using festive red and black buffalo plaid flannel, and I grouped them together on a tray on my dining room table and created a little winter scape around them. It wasn't much, but it provided a hand-made gift for giving to my loved ones who'd supported me and loved me through this loss, and it gave me something to look at to celebrate the season in my house.

During the next spring, after that first Christmas, I determined that I wouldn't spend another one without some of my own decorations. So, thanks to my sweet sons, they drug down all 17 bins of decorations, including a beautiful Martha Stewart 8 ft. pre-lit tree that we'd bought just two years before he passed away and packed in an expensive protective case.

I painstakingly went through 46 years of decorations. Some from the lean years, when we didn't have much. Many were antiques and hand-made by my precious grandmother, some were made by our kids and grandkids in grade school, but I just couldn't keep everything.

I returned everything I didn't choose to keep to its maker, and offered all the rest to family members or donated leftovers, and I kept only the most cherished items. For those, I determined that I could keep only what I could store in one section of a walk-in closet, in my guest bedroom and, most importantly, that I had to be able to manage everything I kept without anyone's help.

That meant that the beautiful tree that I'd handmade gorgeous bows and ribbons for—I'm talking about picture-worthy bows that streamed from the top to the bottom of that 8 ft tree. But my gracious sons, oh how I love and appreciate them, scolded me just a bit and said, "Mom, it's

your tree and you can keep it if you want to! We'll just put it back in the attic in its case and bring it down every year for you." I agreed with them partially; I did keep it but it's not come down from the attic since, and it's the only thing of mine still up there.

Before the next Christmas, I bought a tiny, spindly little 3 ft tree that came in a skinny little box that told me that it couldn't be much to look at—and boy, was I right! It was a Charlie Brown tree, if ever there was one! But, I'd kept quite an assortment of flower picks and ribbon bows (although I gave away tons of them!) and that year, I made that little 3 ft tree so full and so 'big' for its size, and I proudly stood it up on the round table in front of my big picture window and draped my beautiful velvet Christmas tree skirt around it, and stacked all the presents on the floor around it. It looked beautiful! And, best of all, I'd done it all by myself, without needing anybody's help to lift and carry big, heavy bins and boxes down the steep attic stairs.

The first year of that little tree, right after Thanksgiving, I made a dinner and I invited my three youngest grandkids to have a sleepover and together we decorated that little tree. We hung garlands and bows on the staircase, and put candles and a star on the mantel. We watched *Home Alone* and ate popcorn in the family room and remembered Grandpa. It looked and felt like Christmas again! God was so good.

The next Christmas, I used the same little tree, but I changed up the colors of the decorations and bows and I displayed the three little red buffalo plaid trees on my dining room table.

This Christmas will be the fourth without him. I've survived the hardest ones, I think, and now I want to add something new. Well, sort of new, because I've given away the one I had, which I really didn't like. I want a nativity set, but not just any nativity set! I'm looking for just the right one; a smallish size, all wood, no faces, little color, only a few pieces and absolutely NO messy moss or hay on the manger!

I'm already looking forward to this fourth Christmas. Thinking about how gracious the Lord has been to me, and how far he has brought me in healing and recovery from that first one. Thinking about what I can make for loved ones that they might like. Thinking about what I can preach for the Christmas service that will be just right for the occasion, and will proclaim that Jesus is the Reason for the Season, which once again rings in my heart.

Inner Strength – A Different Perspective – by Michelle Lynn

Do you have any ideas on how to use an old mattress? Have you ever heard of Wall Ball? For those that aren't familiar with it; it's basically racquetball, only you use your open hand instead of a racquet.

Wall Ball is one of my son Matthew's favorite games to play. He recently asked if we could go play this game. I had to tell him we can't because, since we moved, we have yet to join the local recreation center. Of course he was disappointed and I affirmed that. I didn't want him to stay in that mood, though. I offered other suggestion like shooting basketball in the hoop in his room. I was concerned that if we played using our main blank wall, that we might damage it somehow. The balls generally used are not exactly soft. Matthew didn't respond. Instead, he found a softer ball in the toy chest. It was a way of improvising. I'm thankful that Matthew has that mindset. It's a great way to not give up and think outside the box.

As I've written before, I learn a lot from watching my boys and the skill of improvising is one of the things I notice. Matthew has not only improvised, but the most recent game of Wall Ball happened using an old mattress that is temporarily leaning up against that same wall. Instead of thinking he couldn't play Wall Ball anymore, he tried it out and sure enough there was enough bounce that he still had fun!

The other way that Matthew improvised was using the mattress as a different way of playing basketball. He's had a different kind of basketball hoop that can be used indoors or in the pool. We have gotten in many hours playing with that. Unfortunately, it broke (we do think it can be fixed). In the meantime, Matthew and I came up with a new challenge - to toss a ball and make it land and stay on the top of the mattress. (As a reminder, the mattress is leaning up against the wall).

This new game has made for hours of both individual fun and mother/son fun – one of the best aspects of the game. Needless to say, my son hasn't asked me about going to play Wall Ball since multiple games using this mattress have been discovered. The other strength of this new found joy is it lessens the frequency of Matthew being disappointed that his older brother isn't in the mood to play – another topic to come soon in future articles.

As I previously mentioned, I learn a lot from my boys. Matthew has taught me to look at what is around me from a different perspective. Thinking outside the box leads to new reasons to be grateful. For example, instead of focusing on how and when I will ever get rid of this mattress, I am grateful to have it.

How is all this related to inner strength, you may be wondering? Well, it's not as easy as it may sound to turn disappointment into reasons to be grateful. Matthew has shown how to use inner strength in new ways – improvising, thinking outside the box, and appreciating what comes from both of those. The result of tapping into one's inner strength of mind and heart is tremendous!

If Matthew and I can do it, so can you!

Hopeful Heart - Another Year Lived – by Christina Oberon

In the kaleidoscope of life, each passing year adds a new layer of experiences, memories, and lessons. As the calendar turns its pages, I find myself standing at the threshold of another year lived. It's a journey marked by triumphs and tribulations, growth and reflection – a mosaic of moments that define a unique narrative.

I sit here in shock at how quickly this year has passed. The clock ticks relentlessly, reminding me that time is both an ally and a witness to our stories. As I bid farewell to one chapter and eagerly await turning the page to the next, there's a natural inclination to pause and ponder the past 365 days.

In the grand scheme of our lives, achievements stand as vibrant threads woven with determination and perseverance. Whether it's a career milestone, a personal triumph, or a creative endeavor, each success can contribute to the rich fabric of our existence. Having the privilege of another year lived is an anthem to resilience, a celebration of the victories – big and small – that shape our identities.

Yet, alongside those successes are the intricate patterns of challenges and setbacks. Life is not a linear journey; it's a meandering path with peaks and valleys. Each obstacle faced, each hurdle overcome, adds depth to our character. I know the events of this year have grown my character immensely. The scars we carry become part of our beauty, reminding us of the strength living within us.

The beauty of another year lived lies not only in the destination but in the journey itself. It's in this year's quiet moments of self-discovery, the laughter shared with loved ones, and the tears shed in solitude. Our lives are composed of a myriad of experiences – a mosaic of emotions that create the entirety of our existence.

Reflection becomes a vital companion as I navigate the passage of time. Taking stock of the lessons learned, the losses endured, the friendships forged, and the love shared, I've gained clarity about my values and aspirations. Each year offers a chance for introspection, an opportunity to refine my purpose and align my actions with my authentic self.

In this thing called life, each step is a choice, each decision a choreography of desires and dreams. Another year lived prompts me to ask:

*Am I dancing to my own rhythm?
Am I living authentically?
Am I seeking God?*

The passing of time serves as a reminder to savor the present, to cherish the moments that make my heart sing.

As we stand on the threshold of a new year, I'm letting this past year be a song that echoes in my heart – one of resilience, huge growth, and gratitude. For in the ebb and flow of life, each year lived is a precious gift, and one I do not take for granted. Here's to the written chapters that grace the pages of another year lived.

Healthy Habits – Music Cures – by Marcy Lytle

I recently played some autumn jazz while I was cleaning the house and was surprised how much it changed my mood, lightened my steps, and lifted my spirits! And even though Christmas music has already been playing for weeks now in the stores and everywhere, it becomes background noise if we're too busy to hear it.

So...here are some ideas on how to let the music cure what's ailing you this season if you're not into the holiday tunes on repeat:

While dressing in the morning – Coffee shop music – look for it and play it. Pretend you're at a coffee shop sitting and resting, even though you have a full day ahead. Go ahead and drink that hot tea or coffee while you listen. Your mind will be at ease as you get to your business of the day.

While wrapping packages – Find instrumental music that's warm and has a fireplace crackling in the background. I find mine on YouTube, but search your own apps, whatever you have. Wrap alone, in a room by yourself, and soak in the soothing sounds as your soul finds rest.

While driving here and there – Instead of thinking of those lists you're making and tending to, tune into a radio station you've never listened to before – perhaps a whole different genre than you've tried. Or just pick an easy listening station and smile as you make it to your destination, breathing a bit slower.

While cooking and baking – Christmas tunes would be my choice for this activity, but if it's not your thing, then choose peppy dancing music that makes you take a few dance steps as you move about in the kitchen. There's really nothing that limbers up the body like dancing in the kitchen. Have you tried it?

While getting ready for bed – Pick an inspirational song that has lyrics you know, and sing along with them as you wash your face, take a bath, or brush your teeth. Let the last thing you hear before your head hits the pillow be the truth about His love for you.

Whatever you have, use it. If you have an old turn table, play those records. If you have earbuds, shut out the world and tune in. If you have a little Bluetooth speaker, use it. If you just have your phone, prop it up and play the music. Or even better...sing at the top of your lungs...or hum softly...your choice.

Music takes a weary heart and makes it rejoice. It's good for you!

Life Right Now - Christmas Flair - By: Jennifer Stephens

Some things just go together.

Peanut butter and jelly.

Macaroni and cheese.

Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce (Fingers crossed they're still together...).

And anybody who's been around young kids lately, knows all about one more undeniable pairing...elementary schools and dress-up days! Between pajama day, hat day, superhero day and all the other well-intentioned spirit days, an educator's attempt to motivate young learners can become even the most creative parent's worst nightmare (We're really not trying to stress anyone out. Promise.).

When I was a classroom teacher, I couldn't always get on board with every single dress-up day. Sports day? Not really my thing. But last December when the principal announced Holiday Flair Day? Yesssss!!! I was jumping up and down ready to spread Christmas cheer by screaming loud for all to hear – just like Will Ferrell's character in the movie *Elf*. I immediately began rummaging through my closet grabbing all the red, green, and sparkly things. Within minutes I'd gathered the perfect red top and tights, bright green shoes, a skirt covered in Santa hat wearing dogs, a metallic tree garland turned boa, and a shiny jingle bell elf hat to top it off! I was ALL IN.

Why is it so easy to jump on board with the silly, relatively unimportant things in life, but when it comes to matters of great consequence we hold back? We hesitate. Like when it comes to sharing Jesus with others. We don't want to be weird about it. But it's so important. As followers of Christ, we are in on the best news of all. News of the goodness of Jesus and the gift He has for all of us when we accept Him into our hearts. Just like putting together an award winning (Yes, I won a coveted jeans day coupon!) outfit filled with Christmas flair, when it comes to sharing the good news of Jesus, we need to be ALL IN - shouting it loud for all to hear!



MARRIAGE

In This Together - Merry & Bright-ish – by Bekah Holland

By the time you're reading this, we're smack dab in the middle of everything merry and bright. I mean, I guess since we live in the age of bigger and better and faster and more, we've been merry and bright since August. Don't get me wrong...I love the holidays! Everything from the smell of pine trees to hot cocoa with exactly 9 marshmallows because that is the perfect number to cover the top while still letting just a little bit of heat escape so you don't burn your tongue. And setting out the handmade nativity scene collection that I've been growing since I was 18. I love the Christmas story in Luke that we take turns reading every year before presents and the food....man, I love the food. *Side note: I could not care less about turkey but I make it at Thanksgiving because my mom and brother love tradition...and turkey. And ham. Yep. I said it. Ham is gross even though bacon is delicious.* Sorry. I don't make the rules. But Christmas is MY holiday in the kitchen! We typically find some amazing human with the patience of Job who has slaved over masa and creating a masterpiece known to most, as tamales. So Christmas Eve is our TexMex celebration, because...queso. And Christmas day is for gumbo, crawfish etouffee and any other delectable treats that happen to strike my fancy when I'm planning the menu or grocery shopping for it (and most likely went shopping while hungry which is a TERRIBLE idea.)

I love watching someone unwrap a gift that I likely hyperventilated over and all the family along with a little *Home Alone* and *White Christmas* mixed in. But to be completely honest, I miss when things were a bit more simple. We had homemade decorations for the funny shaped tree we found because I'm incapable of buying a Christmas tree until all of the decent ones are gone. It's a gift. Things were peaceful. Now it feels like it's all been replaced with chaos, a little selfishness and going nonstop until we just can't do any more. When I mention this, I'm usually met with different ways of saying that I need to remember that first Christmas was full of peace and joy. Which I'm not refuting. However, if you have ever grown a human and then expelled that human from your body, you likely know that night was probably less than peaceful. I can assure you that if I gave birth in a barn, peace would be somewhere below screaming loud enough for the wise men to follow and wondering if punching my husband was an acceptable way to deal with the pain. Now, we can look back on this story and the accounts we read and know that the angels were singing and even the animals seemed to sense this wasn't any normal day at the office. This was the moment that we were waiting for. It was anticipated for thousands of years. But if I had to guess, for Mary and Joseph, things were just a little bit overwhelming. They were likely somewhere in the neighborhood of 12-15 years old. (I literally cannot wrap my head around this because my kids at 12 and 16 can't even be trusted to brush their teeth, much less get married, walk for days and then give birth to the savior of the world). They were weeks from home. And since it was just a little before Uber and orthopedic inserts, they had been walking for an eternity. Did I mention the 12(ish) year old child was oh so very pregnant? As a whole grown woman, I had to convince myself to walk to the bathroom. Oh yeah, and there was that whole immaculate conception thing that Mary was probably the only person who really believed, given it was happening to her. So peace was likely not the primary emotion of the moment, if I had to offer a guess. And from what I know about farm animals, they are not quiet and no amount of Febreeze could fix that smell.

But as little "merry and bright" action was happening that night, the aftermath of that was, without a doubt, filled with joy! Angels singing, animals joining in. And since Jesus was truly fully God and fully human; then he was adding his crying to the mix.

In my own family, I've found myself focused mostly on producing some kind of Hallmark movie kind of Christmas. And not focused on loving the very imperfectness of some of those moments

that I failed to capture. But you know what? If the first Christmas, the night that Heaven came to Earth, wasn't exactly a gentle or quiet gift, why do I think that somehow I have to create this picture-perfect day and feel disappointed when my well laid plans lay elsewhere?

Unmet expectations are killers. As much as I love the hot chocolate on school nights and watching a fire while Christmas movies play, I have to very intentionally remember that I can't expect my husband to read my mind, or know what needs to be done. I can't expect that he or the kids are going to do anything the way that I would, given they still haven't learned the right way to load the dishwasher. So I have a choice to make. Sure, I can make cookies and cakes and all the things. I can decorate to my heart's desire...or not. And I can be present and engaged regardless of any burnt cookies or mouthy teenagers. I can acknowledge my husband and his efforts and choose peace over chaos and love over perfection. I can even give myself a break, make a good cup of tea or take a nap (a girl can dream), and create a little joy and peace of our own, because we get to live our own little miracle in our own little space surrounded by the ones we love the most.

Maybe you can take some time to breathe in a little peace no matter how the turkey turns out or how many times you have to bite your tongue to get through all the family togetherness. Because you and I, and everyone in between, are living this gift we've been given and every day is a chance to do it better. So this holiday season, I'm going to laugh a little longer and love a little louder and make sure that my expectations are only ones that bring a little more light and a little more joy to the people around me and those I love the most.

Also, because pie.

"Mary, exhausted, having just gotten Jesus to sleep, is approached by a young man who thinks to himself...what this girl needs is a drum solo."

Author Unknown

After 40 Years – That Episode – by Marcy Lytle

I'll admit it proudly. We watch a Hallmark series *When Calls the Heart* together, and sometimes we cry together, as well. I know many see Hallmark stories as sappy and silly, and many would not ever ask or even expect their spouse to sit and watch one because...of the cutesy stories and the unreal happy endings. But recently, we watched an episode worth sharing, and we watched it together, which was so moving.

There's a character named Henry, and many in the town have been upset with him because of past wrongdoings, especially a young girl that lost her father due to an action performed by Henry. It's been years now, and Henry has changed, he's a new man, and the town has been forgiving and accepting, and the love he's received has changed him for good. But this girl has been away, and when she returns home she sees him and remembers...and wants to leave again...because she's still angry at what this man did.

The girl's mom gets a chance to tell her daughter of the change in Henry and how the unforgiveness in her daughter's heart is only hurting her, not Henry. And in the final scene of this episode there's a town gathering, at which the girl finds it in her heart to invite Henry and to tell him he's welcome to come. He's stunned, because the present Henry is now a very humble man. He does decide to go and opens the doors to a filled room. His eyes are drawn to one empty seat and it's the one by the girl...one she had saved for him in case he showed up.

My husband and I looked at each other with tears. Sappy, maybe. Silly, no. It was such a picture of forgiveness, and we both know what it's like to forgive each other over and over again. I've said hurtful words in times of arguing. He has raised his voice right back at me. And we had choices to hold on to said hurts or let them go, after a time of grief and remorse. We cried because we too have held a hand or our heart open for the other...to welcome back in...to good graces.

And the only reason we've been able to do so is because we too have been humbled (and are humbled daily) by the grace offered to us by HIM for all the sorry attitudes we've had towards others and even to God himself.

We watch lots of shows together at home, and at the theater. We love shows. And rarely do we cry. But this particular night, seeing a grown man offered forgiveness for a huge hurt, from the heart of a young girl...well it got to us.

This season, grab his hand and watch something sentimental, something that stirs your hearts together, and something that causes you to look at each other with tears, thankful tears, that you have each other and Him. And forgive again...and again.

And it just might be a Hallmark show...wouldn't that be something?

Date Night Fun – Five to Thrive – by Marcy Lytle

Every year for December, I try to share date night ideas that are easy because I KNOW it's a busy time of the year. It's impossible to find a sitter, find the time, or find the funds to go out on a date. But like I just heard someone say, we have to rest and enjoy life...even in the middle of the nutty time of year...if we want to thrive! Same goes for our marriages! So here are five easy December date ideas in between the baking and cleaning and shopping and wrapping...

Gingerbread houses for two – Go to World Market, as they have great ones. Get a gingerbread house now, before they're all gone. After the kids go to bed, or when you've got an hour to sit down...put it together yourselves and indulge. Take photos. Share them on social media. And laugh out loud.

Look at Lights – If there's no sitter, that's okay. Everyone hop in the car and go for a ride around town looking at lights. If your kids are grown, do this as well! Get out and walk in a pretty neighborhood and hold hands while doing it. It's good for the kids, and the neighbors, to see a couple enjoying each other's company while enjoying a night out. When the kids are in bed, or just as you're about to doze off...look at cool lights on your phone together.

Go to the drive-in – yes in the winter! Take blankets, thermoses, snacks, and your pillows. Who cares if you fall asleep in the car? See what's playing, and set a night aside to go...invite another couple...or not. No drive-in near you? Then pack up all the same things and lay on a big blanket and watch a movie in the dark at home.

Advent all in one night – Purchase an adult advent calendar (there are cool ones with food treats, jellies, puzzle pieces, etc.) and open all 24 doors one night for your date. I haven't done this, but I think it might be fun and I'm going to suggest it to my husband! Or make it two nights, if you wish. But enjoy every little treat. They're likely half off by now!

Plan a vacation – You read it correctly. Spend an evening planning your trip after the winter thaw. Pick a place, look at what there is to do there, book a place and set it all up. What a fun night to enjoy your favorite snacks as you stop at the store and bring home...so that no cleanup is necessary.

Don't let December get too full have to have fun with each other, once a week, if you can. We'd love to hear what you do!

For Better or Worse - Tough Decisions – by Kaelin Scott

Have you ever been stuck between a rock and a hard place?

My husband and I had to make a tough decision for our family. It was something we knew we had to do, but that didn't make it easy. We felt torn because making this choice would change a lot of things we had grown comfortable with, and change can be daunting.

After much prayer and discussion, we knew what God was calling us to do, and we made that difficult choice to obey. I won't go into details, but it cost our family greatly. Because of this decision, we lost friends and community. Living on a ranch can be isolating, but we felt more isolated than ever. We knew we were being obedient to God, but no one else seemed to understand. And that felt a lot like a rock and a hard place.

Despite this feeling of loneliness because of our decision, it brought my husband and I closer together. I already knew he was a man of integrity, but I got to witness it again. He stands by his convictions, and I admire that because it's so rare in today's world. Seeing him stand up for what's right made me so proud of him, especially because I know it wasn't easy. His fearless leadership of our family makes it easy to stand beside him and walk in obedience to Christ.

Sometimes marriage can feel like it's us against the world, but it's less intimidating knowing Jesus goes before us. We build our foundation on the Solid Rock so the storms don't wash us away. Standing on the truth isn't always easy, but even when we're alone on an island, we have Him there to guide and comfort us. When Christ is the head of our marriage, making hard decisions gets a little easier. He keeps us afloat as we tread deep waters, and He brings us through them to walk on dry ground.

When facing tough decisions for our family, prayer is our greatest tool. Whenever we have a choice to make, I pray for God to make me and my husband like-minded. I also pray that He would give us courage and peace about our decision. Together, we listen to that still small voice that shows us the way. And even when we stand alone, we face it together, knowing we're never truly alone.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Moving Forward – Joy – by Pam Charro

Joy is definitely one of the themes of the season, and I love the word so much! Images of Christmas cards come to mind, depicting happy families snuggling together by the fire, near a Christmas tree with lots of gifts and plenty of food. Don't we all long for this feeling? The idea of such warmth, belonging, safety, and provision and brings me such a feeling of peace and well-being, of more than enough. I love this time of year and the warm fuzzies that accompany it.

My relationship with God has allowed me to experience so much of that feeling that it might surprise you how many people have actually believed my name to be Joy. It started with a couple at church coming to me and saying, "We know your name is Pam, but we always call you Joy." Then I met a woman at the gym who I introduced myself to as Pam, but two weeks later, when she saw me, she said, "Joy, right?". And not long after that, praying in a new small group, the speaker looked at me and asked God to please bless Joy. I have other friends who know my birth name, but will only call me Joy, and I'm guessing it's a name God gave to me when my relationship with him was restored. I doubt that many would have considered it an accurate description of who I was before then; they might have called me Angry, Depressed or Overwhelmed instead.

But what does it really mean to embody true joy? Being considered a joyful person certainly hasn't perfected my life or removed all of my struggles; if anything, it has made me more dependent than ever on the God who introduced me to freedom from hopelessness. I'm distracted from this joy on a daily basis, by legitimate concerns or just because I'm tired and my thoughts lean toward being a little grumpy. And, as much as I love people and they truly bring me happiness, my interactions with others can never be enough to keep my mind and heart healthy. I can easily become as despondent as anyone else when I don't remember where my true joy comes from.

So I guess it's a blessing that I'm constantly reminded to rely on God for my joy, because I don't ever want to believe I'm okay without him. I may have been created with the personality that I have and appear to be always excited about life, but those attributes would have never been enough to get me through my own brokenness and this broken world. So often I feel the need to remember how loved I am by my creator, all of the things he has done to prove it to me, and all of the goodness that is coming my way because of that love. On an almost daily basis, I can believe myself to be such an utter failure otherwise, and lose track of anything I can feel good about. But as I walk with God and get to know him and meditate on his word, he transforms me from the inside out so that the knowledge of his love travels from my head to my heart. My physical brain and body have been changed by the understanding that he really is crazy about me! Only he could have taught me the love that I have in him, so that I have become a walking testimony of love to this hopeless world. That is the only kind of joy that can sustain me while I'm here.

I hope that the joy others see in me is contagious and causes people around me to want to know where it comes from. It's been so freely given to me, and I want everyone to have it!

So, in this season where the word "joy" is so commonly used, may I continually point others to the only source of my true and lasting joy.

Joy to the world!

Rooted in Love - The Greatest Gift – by Kaelin Scott

Merry Christmas!

It's the most wonderful time of the year, but for some reason it's also the most stressful. Doesn't it seem like a rat race sometimes? There's so much pressure to have the perfect decorations, buy everyone an awesome gift, make the yummiest food, wear the cutest outfit, etc. It's like all the fun and merriment gets sucked out of the holidays because we're too busy trying to make them *perfect*.

With all the cozy lights, festive music, and sparkly decorations, I love the Christmas season. But the older I've gotten, the more I've let it become another reason for anxiety. Another filler for my to-do list. Another reason to stress about finances. Another way to make myself feel overwhelmed instead of relaxing and enjoying the special season.

So this year, in the moments when I feel overstimulated by everything I have to do, I'm going to remind myself of what Christmas is really about. Presents are fun, of course, and so are decorations and parties. But the true joy of Christmas is simply being present with my family, making memories together. Slowing down enough to delight in the little joys all around us every day. Reflecting on all we've been through together. Taking time to be grateful for the beautiful life we've been given.

It's easy to materialize Christmas, and I think we've all succumbed to it in some way. And yes, I'll still be putting up my Christmas tree and drinking hot chocolate and dancing around the kitchen to Michael Buble. There's nothing wrong with being festive and having holiday spirit. There's also nothing wrong with spreading cheer or making an otherwise dreary season feel brighter. The important thing is that we remember not to lose focus of what really matters, and that's family, friends, and faith.

Most importantly, let's never forget that Jesus is the reason we celebrate. On a quiet night a long time ago, He was born as a humble baby. Our King of Kings didn't need flashy lights or shiny presents or color-coordinated outfits. His love was enough to make the darkest night brighter, and the hope He gave us was the greatest gift of all.

So while we partake in all the crazy fun this holiday season, let's also take time to rest and embrace the true joy of the season. Let's hug our families close and tell them how much we love them. Let's snuggle up by the fire and read the Bible to our kids. Let's put our phones down and make new memories together, and let's also remember the good times we've already had. And let us always take time to thank God for the precious gift of His Son.

Happy birthday, Jesus. Thank you for loving us so!

Simple Truths - The Shift – BY Marcy Lytle

I have a wonderful friend (in fact, many) that often text me and I text them. And one particular friend and I struggle with the same sorts of issues, so we often try to encourage each other. From “joy” pictures, as we like to call them, to songs we like, or just words to uplift...they all work together to shift our moods.

This particular morning we were chatting, and she replied with, “...this text convo has shifted my morning a bit – in a very good way. Thanks for that, dear friend!” Gosh, that made me smile and shifted my mood, as well!

It made me think about how just something so small can shift our moods, and the moods of others, so we need to be aware and care and do it – send the photo, the word, the song – whatever it is!

When I walk outside and feel the warmth of the sun, my mood shifts and I look up.

When I eat a square of dark chocolate, I feel indulgent and so content!

When I listen to certain songs with certain beats or lyrics, I often end up dancing.

When I read a verse that speaks life to me on a particular subject, I feel relieved.

So if we have lots of little things that shift our own moods, it stands to reason that those same small things might shift the mood of a friend.

When a friend reads my Instagram story and comments, I’m happy they took time to respond!

When a friend texts me to ask how our vacation went, it makes me know I’m loved.

When a friend waters my yard while we’re away, I am so grateful for her!

When a friend shares with me her struggles and asks me to pray, I feel honored.

That last one might seem odd, but it’s good to even ask a friend to pray for us, because we are placing value and trust in that friend’s faith.

So...what shifts can you make in your mood or thoughts today...or in the mood of a friend? It really only takes scrolling through your playlists or photos to send a good one to her with a note that you’re thinking of her. It usually takes five minutes to take a break and breathe, break off that dark chocolate, or think of someone else.

We all need the shift...often many times a day. Think of what a car ride would be like if the gears didn’t shift? We’d have to pull over, because something is wrong...very wrong. And it’s the same with us. We have to shift often, as we speed up and slow down...and we can also be the shift for someone else to help them on their route as well.

The Shift. Make it. Be it.

Unearthly Thing - Batting Away the Big Blue Kitty (of Depression) – by Angela Dolbear

This coming March will mark six years since I had a stroke, actually several strokes at the same time in different parts of my brain. They were caused by blood clots due to a heart procedure. Because the main stroke happened in the speech and language part of my brain, it took away my ability to spell and type, which I had to relearn how to do (and still struggle with). And the stroke also left me with bouts of depression.

I never experienced depression before the stroke. Sure, I would get the blues occasionally, but nothing like full-blown chemical depression. The brain doesn't react well to injury.

My doctor gave me the option to start taking prescription antidepressants, but I opted out. Not that there is anything wrong with these medications, I felt they might not play well with my post-stroke mind and other medications I was taking. I sensed that God was going to help me through the depression. He did, and He does.

Depression sneaks up on me like a cat slinking into a room. When my morning sleepiness doesn't wear-off but progresses into a dark heaviness that I just can't shake, I know I am under the influence of depression.

Other times I wake up with it, as if a huge blue cat is lying on top of me, its furry weight and steady purring smother all my energy and strength, and desire to get up and be productive. I imagine the cat is blue because that's how it makes me feel. Blue. A deep dark blue.

But I'm learning to tame the bad kitty of depression. Recognizing when it is upon me, and not just moody menopause or cranky-lack-of-sleep blues, is the first step. My taming strategy works for those too, but recognizing when the actual chemicals in my brain are darkening my outlook is key.

QUICK NOTE: I am not a mental health professional. I have developed these strategies through years of experience, and truthfully, with help from God.

ANOTHER QUICK NOTE: There is no shame in depression. If depression is something that hits you daily, talk to your doctor. Seriously. No shame. And get professional help if you need it.

Okay, here are a few strategies I use to shoo the Big Blue Kitty away:

1. Pray. As soon as I realize I can't shake the blues, I pray specifically for healing from depression in Jesus' mighty name. THYME Magazine's Editor-in-Chief Marcy Lytle recently wrote about depression, too. She suggested it is important to have others pray for you and I totally agree.
2. Know that it's okay to feel bad. Read through the Psalms in the Bible or do a search for "Lamenting in the Bible" and you will see plenty of examples where people poured out their hearts to God. Psalms 3, 6, 51, and 62 are some favorites. God already knows how we feel. We might as well invite Him in to help.
3. Start a mental chain of gratitude. Recall things, events, and people you are thankful for. Don't stop until you have reached at least twenty.
4. Do something. Doing nothing just feeds depression. It makes the Big Blue Kitty heavier and more oppressive. Even on days when I don't think I have it in me to even take a

shower in the morning, I make myself do it. I think about how nice it will be to feel clean and fresh afterward, and that I accomplished something. Sometimes the steamy flow of hot water is so soothing. Also, the shower is a safe place to cry. Sometimes getting it out helps bigtime.

Examples of things to do:

- Read a novel – a good story can be a much-needed mental escape. And reading doesn't take much energy.
- Listen to music – Especially praise and worship music. Taking our minds off our emotions and putting them on the awesome goodness of Jesus is powerful and healing.
- Pet your pet – I have a sweet black cat named Maddy who seems to always know when I am feeling down. She will walk across my desk and lay on my arm, so I must stop and pet her. Her big gold-green eyes and soft purring always soothes me.
- Get some sun on you -- Spending time outdoors always makes me feel better. After I play ball with my two dogs, I feel lighter, probably because they are fun and make me laugh watching them run and jump for their tennis balls.
- Do something creative – write in a journal, sing, write a story. Try not to judge if it's good or not because that is not the point. Expressing creativity stimulates the brain and heart to feel better.
- Do something active – Take a walk or a drive. When I lived in Austin, Texas, I used to stroll through the Lakeline Mall whenever I felt depressed. The cool bright environment distracted me and refocused my mindset. I rarely bought anything because actual shopping requires energy and thought for me. I'm just not a mall-store consumer. But I found that window shopping in the mall also helps with writer's block. Bonus! I have Opry Mills a few miles away from me here in Nashville, but I have yet to explore it. So far, I have found the beautiful hilly green tree-filled property we live on chases my blues away.

If none of these strategies ease depression's hold on you, please consider contacting your doctor.

If you are reading this article, chances are you are struggling with depression. I am praying for you. I ask God to be with every person reading this. May He heal you and help you. In Jesus' name. Amen. God heals and He is so good. I will say it again and again.

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 novels are available in paperback, Kindle and audiobook formats on [Amazon](#). Angela writes real, relatable, and reverent fiction. She loves reading, writing prose, as well as writing and recording music with her husband Tim in their studio in Nashville, TN--listen to their music on [Sound Cloud](#). Please drop by and sign-up for news and to read new stories and hear new original music at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>. Blessings to you!

Right now, a gentle rain is falling, moistening the thirsty ground and bathing my plants with miraculous, healing water from the sky. It's been so hot and humid that I've neglected to battle the weeds growing where they shouldn't, waiting, instead, for cooler weather—then I will attack with an array of trusty tools. Moist ground makes it easier to dig the roots up, and cooler air is much more pleasant for working.

It has arrived.

Now it's time to declare war.

Weeds aren't the only thing I battle in the garden. Something is eating my ornamental kale, squirrels dig holes in my potted plants and try sneaky ways to eat the birdseed, sweeping leaf debris off the patio is a constant, and, of course, the rats. Fence boards come loose, benches need repair...everything deteriorates, work abounds. Adam's curse has fallen on me. Life is an uphill climb and I feel like I'll never reach the top.

But for now...back to weeds and war. I can't say I've made it easy on myself. Eliminating the grass saves me the drudgery, exertion, (or expense) of mowing, but there are trade-offs. My landscaping consists of areas of rock, mulched planting beds, and granite pathways lined with a combination of stones and plants. Pinterest makes it look so artful and tidy! But, the truth is, it doesn't stay that way. This is what I think: those beautiful neat-as-a-pin rock mosaics and plant arrangements only last for the photo shoot. Life isn't static. Living things grow, move, get sick, flowers fade and fall, wind blows leaves helter-skelter, the earth moves, weed seeds fall into the tiniest cracks, and there you have it—the messiness of life manifests everywhere.

My battle with weeds is primarily hand to hand combat, meaning my trusty tools and hands are the most effective weapons. (I avoid chemical warfare.) Weeds grow in the rocks and around the plants living among them, they love the granite pathways, and they find their way through the mulch. Don't get me wrong. Rocks and mulch slow them down; otherwise, I'd have an entire yard of weeds, but it's a battle I can't let up on. The more vigilant I am, the easier it is to stay on top of it. They will take over; it's Nature, the natural order of things. I must fight to keep things looking beautiful.

There is one area bordering the pathway on the right side that's requires a meticulous approach. That's because there are plants growing in that narrow space I want to keep, and rocks I don't want to disturb too much. The weeds grow in such a way that I have to be careful not to pull up the good plant along with the "bad" one. Maybe I should say "unwanted," because is there really a *bad* plant? Maybe. Nevertheless, it happens, and I feel bad when it does because I really value each and every one. But the weeds have to go, otherwise they'll overtake the area and soon the plants I want to grow will be overcome. Not every growing thing can be kept alive, choices must be made, as there are sheep and goats in the plant world...

I've been reflecting on this war on weeds, thinking about how things are. It's a fallen world—fallen from the perfect harmony with Creation and Himself God intended. Until it's restored that

Someday, there are battles to be fought, not out of hate, but from love. Out of love for my garden and plants, I declare war against weeds, bugs, diseases, and squirrels, and pray that one day, they will be restored as well.

...because God is Love, and He loves them all.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Annuals and Perennials – by Marcy Lytle

Those two terms in the title of this story refer to flowers and plants...usually. However, I'm going to use them to refer to friends. And it's just because I've been thinking a lot about friends, lately.

As we get older and decades roll by, we have these friends I'll call "perennials" that are around forever. They show up for us any time we call, we can meet them for a visit after not seeing them forever, and the blooming begins again...because these friends just keep coming back and never leave. You know, like those flowers you plant in your yard that say "perennial" on the tag. They're designed to come back, year after year.

However, with our wacky Central Texas weather these past few years, I've lost plants that were even called perennials because of the harshness of drought, ice and heat! And I've seemingly lost friends over the years that were there with me, forever...or so I thought.

I heard someone once say that friends are just seasonal. So maybe they would be called annuals. We have a friend for a while and then time passes, seasons change...and that friend is no longer on our radar. So we find ourselves back in the garden of friendship seeking, looking for new blooms to plant and enjoy in our gardens.

I have a mix of both of these kinds of plants in my garden against my back fence. I do have some perennials that just keep on standing there so pretty, and honestly they're my favorites! Dusty Miller is a great plant that just keeps on giving, no matter where I plant it. Rosemary has survived and put off its amazing aroma and never budged through all of the seasons of wild storms and those big range of temperatures. But every spring, summer, fall and winter I do insert some annuals among the perennials. That's fun too, but I plant them knowing they won't last but that one season.

Frankly, I've been disappointed in friendships over the years, and I'm pretty sure I've written about it more than once. I'm also sure that I have not been the best of friends to many of my garden buddies either. But I'm ready to get over it, give thanks, and enjoy the full view.

Perennial friends are few and far between. They can move miles away and still be close. We can both change courses in our lives, and they still enjoy hearing about us and we about them. I give thanks for these friends, more so as I age and still find them near.

Annual friends are those that come and go. We're super close and enjoy our time together, but then space or life or even change of churches occurs, and though we rarely see them anymore, they're always in our thoughts. Maybe they'll show up again, or maybe we will make new friends.

I find it hard to make new friends the older I get, because I want people to know who I am (rotten and nice, all in one package) and love me in spite of it, but it's hard because they don't know my past, where I've been and all the things that have made me, me.

This season, I'm observing my yard and my garden and all the things that have made it and survived, those places where I've pulled and removed, other plants that have just not made it at all. I even decided to plant collard greens in my front area pots, surrounded by decorative Christmas ornaments, for something new!

I'm tired of carrying disappointment and expectations of my friends. They've all contributed beauty to my garden at one time or another, and still do. They're all beautiful, and without every last one of them I wouldn't be who I am. They have enriched, and still do enrich, my life. And without the pretty mix of all them, my garden would be sparse, unattractive and not nearly so beautiful.

I don't know what this season will bring in the way of weather around here, and I'm sure some more plants will be affected, but then I'll plant more. And as I do, I'm going to start giving thanks for the time each plant bloomed and brought me joy. For each friend that has entered, exited, and entered again...or for those that have stood near me without flinching and loved me in spite of my quiriness and flaws.

What a beautiful garden with annuals and perennials and even Christmas balls to bring joy around my home this year!

FRESH THYME - Go Ahead and Cry

I cry easily. I don't cry too much in movies, because somehow they're just actors and it's just a story, but I might slip out a tear once in a while. I don't cry at the weddings of others (but of course I did at my kids' weddings!), and I don't cry when rejoicing, either. I'm just happy. But like I said, I cry easily.

I cry when I think of my parents, as just one thought can send me into puddles of tears for a few minutes.

I cry when I'm tired and weary because I haven't rested as I should...and the day just gets too long.

I cry when intrusive thoughts steal my peace by coming at me with fear of "what-ifs."

I cry when I'm disappointed in others and how I've been treated.

When I cry, it releases what's bottled up or bubbling up in me, like a volcano about to erupt and overflow. I feel much better when I cry, even if I can't explain why tears are rolling down my cheeks. And often, those tears flow the most when I'm driving. I have good talks with the Man Upstairs while I drive.

I read that emotional tears flush away toxins and stress hormones, so that's a great benefit to those salty waterworks!

Be encouraged, if you find yourself crying a lot this season for explained, or unexplained reasons.

We read in the psalms many places about crying out to the Lord and being heard by him. In fact, several verses end with "he delivers them out of their troubles."

I just read a story where David, a great leader in the bible, wept and cried hard, along with all of his men, when they realized their city and families had been ravaged and taken. It even says they wept until they could weep no more. In fact, after David cried, it says he found strength in the Lord, inquired of Him, obeyed him and took back all that was taken!

There's no shame in crying, no apologies needed if tears erupt, and no guilt associated with letting those tears flow...regardless of the reason. We are created with emotions, and we react to things – all different things – with tears.

Tears can evoke empathy from those nearby, and sometimes we don't want empathy or to appear pitiful in front of others. That's okay. We can retreat to our rooms (or take those drives) and cry and pray and cast our cares, and all the things.

Finally, we are told that God will wipe away our tears for good one day. He sees every tear we cry, and makes note.

This season, there are going to be cries from little tired kiddos. Older kids might cry because they don't get what they want (let's hope not, though!). Grandparents and parents might cry because families can't get together.

However...

I'm praying that all of us experience the kind of crying this season that is associated with joy. I want to think again of the love of God that sent his son...I want to recall his goodness from this past year...I want to see the light and be the light...

And I want all of that to send tears of joy. Because I want to experience those tears of joy and see how different they feel from tears of sadness. I'm thinking they will be associated with a big smile.

I'm praying for you, too!

FRESH THYME – When We Are Weak – by Marcy Lytle

Do you ever think about all the directives in scripture that totally seem impossible to obey? I do. Here are some of the ones that come to mind, the ones that I struggle with from time to time, the ones that spark questions in this ever churning mind of mine...

We are told that there is peace that passes understanding, but how, when war ensues?

We are told to be anxious for nothing, but yet the future seems scary in every direction.

We are told to pray for the sick and they will be healed, but when...God?

We are told that He never leaves us or forsakes us, yet sometimes loneliness breaks us.

We are told that He is our Shepherd and we don't have to fear...not even death. How?

We read about that hope of heaven...which we cannot even comprehend...so how does that comfort?

We are encouraged to take up the shield of faith, but some days we cannot lift a finger.

We are instructed to give thanks in everything, because that's His will. But that's hard.

We are urged to forgive as we have been forgiven, but the forgetting is hard, and so is the forgiving.

We are told to not lean on our own understanding, but rather to trust. But yet we have these minds that churn...

I could go on with a long list of directives that I myself have tried to follow, only to fail miserably on a daily basis. It seems I cannot control the thoughts that enter my mind...or can I? I haven't figured out how. So therefore, I have to figure out where to place them so that they don't ruin my day.

I don't think the key is living perfectly in obeying all of those commands, because we still have these battles and skirmishes we're in the thick of...every day and moment. But rather, the key is being still to be reminded to know the truth and to choose to turn back to Him and all that He is.

I once realized that thoughts are like leaves that fall from the trees and line our walkways and fill our yards, until we get out a rake and sweep them away. If we don't, we have an unsightly entrance to our homes.

Leaves are going to fall, in the form of thoughts and anxiety. Winds are going to blow that whisper, "What if?" and, "Be sore afraid." Flood waters might even rise, both literally and spiritually, and we may fear for our lives. Or even the worst...lose our lives.

Once I go down that path of leaving the leaves, letting them pile up until they rot, and then sitting in them until my entire self stinks...it's hard to stand up and move without slipping and falling in the rotting muck.

Remember the verse that says when we are weak, He is strong? Thank goodness. I cry out to Him daily to arrest the negative and fearful thoughts. Sometimes, I text a friend to pray for me. And other days, I sit and listen to music or read the Words of truth about the One, the Savior, The King of Kings, the Conqueror, the Prince of Peace, the Mighty God, all the things...

He invites us to the impossible on this earth, because He lives among us and in us. Always working things together for good, preparing us for something even greater.

And when I simply cannot obey those directives to be at peace, take heart, and trust...He's there to still my noisy mind and hold me and help me and be with me...like no other human can. Because He's not human. He is divine. And he's mine. And He's yours.

Take heart if you're feeling a bit fearful and fretful here at the end of 2023. Who knows if we will see 2024? Thinking about that possibility might frighten those cozy socks right off of our feet. His words, those directives, are just like the Shepherd's stick that just gently prods us back in the right direction, away from the cliff...every time...and back to still waters. To where we "shall not want" for any good thing the Shepherd provides...which includes goodness and mercy...and a table in the presence of those enemies called thoughts.

FRESH THYME - Without Scissors – by Marcy Lytle

One morning I was getting ready and wondered what the world would be like with no availability to scissors or snips.

In a world without scissors, we'd all have dangling threads from our hems, which would look awful and feel even worse.

In a world without scissors, nails would grow and we would bite, and they'd always be uneven, and oh so gross.

In a world without scissors, paper would be torn and uneven, and rendered useless for the pretty place we had intended.

In a world without scissors, hair would grow and grow, beards would lay unkempt, and we might soon feel unsightly and unworthy and unseen except by the forest.

In a world without scissors, some bags would never be opened...because they're that hard to pry.

In a world without scissors, little kids and their hand dexterity would never develop, and they would never have the fun of saying, "I did it!" as they got the lines all straight and pretty.

In a world without scissors, tags would hang on new clothes until we pulled and we yanked, and we tore and we cut our tender fingers to remove them.

In a world without scissors, no trimming, no making things neat, no pruning and no designs could fully be seen because that which is sharp wouldn't be there to cut away that which is not.

And then, I remembered a verse in the bible.

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is alive and active.

Sharper than any double-edged sword,

it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow;

it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

As a young person that verse scared me, because it sounded hard and hurtful, because swords cut like scissors and that's what the word of God is compared to, and so I was afraid and scared of his judgment and his hand...

Until I met the one who holds the scissors, or speaks the Word, and I know now that scissors and swords and cutting and dividing and all of the things that are snipped and removed from my heart and my ways - well that's a good thing!

Because cutting makes things look better, trimming promotes new growth, getting rid of danglers and plastics and opening up aromas and flavors - those things are all necessary and pleasant!

I'm glad we have scissors in our world, ones we can grab and snip away the unwanted. And I'm glad for the one who speaks words that are even stronger than scissors – they're like swords – but they're the protector and the provider of the one who's listening – and that's me.

A world without scissors...I shudder to think...