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## **Christmas as Devotional: A Time of Commitment**

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# CHRISTMAS AS DEVOTIONAL: A TIME OF COMMITMENT

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Cherry B. Silver

**Abstract:** *Christmas is more than a time for celebrations and traditions — it is an occasion to remember the blessings and miracles in our lives. From the joy of friends and family to the peace inspired by devotion and dedication Christmas offers us a time to marvel at the mercies of God; let us remember the holier anthems of the season.*

When asked, “What Christmas do you remember best,” we often think of times when celebrations were beyond the ordinary. In normal times, fulfilling Christmas traditions is hard work, and results are often transient. We dive into our eight areas of celebration, driven by visions of Christmas past: 1) decorations, 2) food, 3) music, 4) cards and letters, 5) gifts, 6) charity, 7) gatherings and friendship, and 8) religious services and special presentations.

People look forward to the holidays, expecting sentiment, sociability, and sensory experiences. Conversely, people suffer from disappointment and even depression when high expectations go unfulfilled. If Christmas is just lights and gifts, tearing off wrapping paper by the tree gets us through the externals very fast. Then comes the letdown. As Mary Ellen Edmunds philosophized, “You can never get enough of what you don’t need.”<sup>1</sup>

It is a serious task to draw from the well of life experience and express what matters at this season, to somehow blend ultimate hope and deep seeking with family and traditions, to probe beyond the popular and counter the commercial.

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1. Mary Ellen Edmunds, *You Can Never Get Enough of What You Don’t Need: The Quest for Contentment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005).

### Create a Personal Message

In the Bushman home, my artist father created cards from Ted and Dorothy each year with a jazzy drawing and a friendly greeting to send to friends. As a graduate student in Boston, I decided to send out my first personal Christmas message. I began with a simple drawing, a line of scripture, and a meditative verse. It was a time when metaphysical poets earned my respect. If I could imitate their sincere praise of the child that became the Savior, I reasoned, I might make my greeting a message of devotion, not just celebration of a season.

Such verse is based on an idea or *conceit* that radiates meanings in several directions. The governing metaphor meshes present time with past and future, mortal life with the eternal, struggle with fulfilment, uncertainty with commitment. And all this makes sense through the mission of Jesus Christ.

My model was Edward Taylor (1642–1729), a Puritan minister in western Massachusetts. As he prepared to administer the sacrament of the Lord's supper at the high holiday in his simple meetinghouse, Taylor collected his thoughts in verse and created more than two hundred private poems. Through a startling yoking of dissimilar images, Taylor's raw lines convey his concern for man's fallen condition and his felt need for God's grace. In Meditation 8 on John 6:51, for example, Taylor treats "I am the Living Bread." Here is stanza four.

In this sad state, Gods Tender Bowells run  
Out streams of Grace: And he to end all strife  
The Purest Wheate in Heaven, his deare-dear Son  
Grinds, and kneads up into this Bread of Life.  
Which Bread of Life from Heaven down came and stands  
Disht on thy Table up by Angells Hands.<sup>2</sup>

There is a tactile, kinetic power in the imagery of God grinding, kneading, and serving his Son as the bread of life to save us. The literalness shocks us into sensing God's sacrifice. The Father conveys unbounded mercy as He offers us a chance to partake of the Lord's supper.

I experimented with verse forms over the years, trying like Edward Taylor to prepare my mind for the season through a family Christmas message. After our daughter was born, for instance, my verse in the

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2. Edward Taylor, "I am the Living Bread Meditation Eight: John 6:51," Poetry Foundation (website), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46135/i-am-the-living-bread-meditation-eight-john-651>.

metaphysical tradition described God drawing us like fish into his basket through this infant:

Her smiles and happy, noisy songs are bait  
 To catch our praise  
 For Him who saves  
 By drawing us where holier anthems wait. ...  
 The sweetness of her five months' life has set  
 Our purpose. God  
 Could find no rod  
 To land us better in the gospel net.

### Savor Times of Testimony

Twenty-four years later Barnard and I, as missionaries, celebrated Christmas with a small group of believers in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa. That proved to be a special outreach event. Our daughter had flown in from Utah on her December break from medical school to join us. Côte d'Ivoire was a country where we had lived as a family when she and her brother were in grade school and this was her first time back. On Saturday, the group held a baptismal service at the lagoon. On Sunday, after services, Church members and investigators came to the missionary apartment for a light buffet and a spiritual feast. It turned out to be our last week in the country: due to security concerns, we were being transferred to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

After the buffet, as we stood in a circle, Elder Silver asked each one — man, woman, school-aged child — to declare what Jesus meant to them. Each had something personal and sweet to say. I later tried to capture in free verse the feeling of that circle of faith:

That hot Christmas day in Abidjan  
 we celebrated after church by cooking rice and sauce  
 for fifty-seven friends —  
 Ivorians, some Zairoise, Americans, Ghanaians too —  
 who crowded in our house and sang with us in French,  
 “Venez, tous fideles.”

And when we told them we were leaving soon,  
 some cried and pressed our hands  
 and made us take their photos  
 so that our comradery would not be lost.

So much is lost, if only mortal,  
 that we cannot love fully if we seize this day as all.  
 But when we shared our hope in Christ for life,  
 not just a village/city life,  
 but living on with Him in brotherhood, forever,  
 they understood, they smiled and waved us on.  
 Next Christmas, they will cook the rice and lead the hymn,  
 “Douce nuit, sainte nuit! ... C’est Jesus le Sauveur!”

And we will sing it here, a hemisphere away,  
 Silent night, holy night ... Jesus Lord at his birth ...  
 Christ the Savior is born.

### Find the Miracles in Your Life

The spiritual highlight of the 2013 Christmas season began for our family in October. That was when a fierce microburst of wind in southeast Idaho blew two missionaries on a service project off a trailer and smashed them into the pavement. Our eighteen-year-old grandson, Stewart Silver, was one of the young elders. He hit the back of his head and began to convulse. From that point on, my husband Barnard registered thirty-six miracles that made possible Stewart’s survival. Among those miracles was getting help immediately, being flown to a trauma hospital, having space cleared for an operation, lifting part of his skull as his brain swelled, surviving on a ventilator in a coma while his brain bled, regaining consciousness and then speech, mobility, and memory.

Grandfather Barnard Silver had the privilege of giving Stewart a priesthood blessing as he lay in the coma, assisted by the boy’s uncle Drew Clark. He expressed confidence that the missionary would recover. His mother Ariel Clark Silver, who had flown in from Ohio, and I added our faith and fervent prayers. That evening Barnard consulted with the Intensive Care Unit physician who showed him the x-rays of the damage and confided there was very little chance the young man would come out of it. Which to believe — the physician with his tangible evidence, or the blessing from his grandfather with its spiritual insights? Despite the doctor’s discouragement, Stewart’s path turned into one of healing. In two and a half weeks instead of the six anticipated, he left the hospital supported by his father, still recovering balance and strength but walking and talking.

As his mother then his father returned to their work and other children in Ohio, it was decided to have Stewart recuperate at our home in Salt Lake City, where we as grandparents could drive him to

appointments with his surgical team in Pocatello every few weeks. The end goal was to replace his own skull cap — kept frozen in the hospital's freezer — before Christmas.

All that fall, Stewart wore a black plastic protective helmet on his head to protect the area missing a skull piece. He attended Church and concerts and dinner meetings with us. He received an apostolic blessing from Elder Neil L. Andersen. He had an interview with Elder Russell M. Nelson, then responsible for all missionary service in the Church. When his surgeons checked him in November, they were encouraging: "We've never seen anyone recover so well from the craniectomy procedure." As we neared mid-December, he was hitting the markers in physical and occupational therapy sessions that would permit pre-Christmas restorative surgery. His mother, Ariel, flew to Utah to join us for the repair. Once again, he lay unconscious in bed with a drain line easing pressure and his head wrapped in white bandages. This time, he got up faster and was soon eating and walking.

While in the hospital, Stewart and Ariel sat beside the surgical assistant to examine the detailed CT scans taken shortly after the accident. Only then did they see the heart of the miracle — that the blow against the pavement fractured his skull in a curving pattern that missed the foramen magnum, the crucial area protecting the brain stem which controls life and thought processes, by a mere 0.42 cm. Death and disability were definitely possibilities, but they were avoided by a fraction of a centimeter.

I don't remember how our Christmas Day was spent in Salt Lake City that year. I do remember that Ariel and Stewart caught a December 21st flight from Utah to Ohio, permitting him to greet his father and five sisters again and accelerate his recovery during the holiday season. Our Christmas thoughts focused on their reunion. After New Year he enrolled in a college term. In June he received a recall to the Idaho Twin Falls Mission and successfully completed his two-year service. In 2018 a Church production crew interviewed Stewart and his former missionary companion at the scene of the accident to add their wisdom to a Church documentary film on safety. His black protective helmet now sits on our upper closet shelf as a memento of miracles.

### **Meditate on a Scripture Verse**

Every Christmas, I have decided, invites fulfillment of warm traditions in many ways, but the season becomes truly memorable when we insert devotion and dedication, making it a time to marvel at the mercies of God and pledge to maintain a worthy way of life. The model I found years

ago in Edward Taylor's poetic meditations encouraged my adaptation of the story of the tax collector Zacchaeus from Luke:

Jesus once spied high in a tree  
 A recalcitrant sinner,  
 And stopped to abide with him that day.  
 Elated, repentant,  
 He descended, never to let free  
 Of his Redeemer's  
 Hand down the sacrificial way.  
 We who keep watches in the fearsome night —  
 Over a fretful child  
 Or concerned for self and loved ones and the rest  
 Of men — need  
 Like Zacchaeus climb awhile for sight,  
 And then rejoicing  
 Haste down to serve in peace our princely guest.

Christmas 2020 for everyone is bound to be a notable one. May it be a holiday of commitment and dedication as well as celebration.

**Cherry Bushman Silver** holds degrees in English and American literature from the University of Utah, Boston University, and Harvard. She has taught courses at BYU-Provo and colleges in Washington State and California. While serving on the General Board of the Relief Society from 1990 to 1997, she contributed chapters to *Knit Together in Love: A Focus for LDS Women in the 1990s* and wrote the *History of the Elaine Jack Administration*. For eighteen years she has focused on women's history and has served on the executive committee of the *Mormon Women's History Initiative Team (MWHIT)*. With Carol Cornwall Madsen, she edited *New Scholarship on Latter-day Saint Women in the Twentieth Century* (2005). She is currently helping edit and annotate 47 years of diaries written by Emmeline B. Wells, editor, suffrage leader, and fifth general Relief Society president. The Wells diaries are being published online by the Church Historians Press. Cherry and her husband, Barnard Silver, served missions in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, and in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo. They live in Holladay, Utah, and have two children and ten grandchildren.