

UPDATE SHELVIS AND NANCY SMITH-MATHER

Thank God for Christmas

Usually, when I think of Christmas, my mind floods with warm memories of American and family Christmas traditions. On Christmas Eve, there is the candle light service, and my spirit is lifted, as I raise my candle on the course line, “fall on your knees, oh hear, the angels voices, oh night divine, oh night when Christ was born.” On Christmas morning, which started quite early when I was younger and a bit later when we were older, we all squeeze on the sofa. Then, my sisters, brother and I take turns passing out gifts in front of a glowing Christmas tree. Perhaps some of you are like me, and the gift of time with family and friends is deeply inter-twined with the celebration of a humble and holy birth long ago, the birth of the One who reminds us that God is with us.

When the familiar customs of Christmas are removed, I am forced to reflect more deeply on the question: what is Christmas really all about? When cold winter weather is replaced with the heat of East Africa and my family gathering is a continent away, then I take more time to pause and ponder the meaning of Christmas. This year was our most “different” Christmas. Consequently, I focused more intently on God’s presence in our midst.

We initially planned a short trip to neighboring Uganda for a change of pace during the holidays. We did not plan that the Christmas season would find an outbreak of violence in our home of South Sudan. As the 25th approached, each day brought news of violence spreading and an increase in lives lost.

On Christmas, we shared the day with a South Sudanese colleague whose family lives in Uganda. The family welcomed us to a beautiful dinner. The traditional elements of an American Christmas meal were replaced with those of an East African feast including delicious goat meat, mangos, and tea, yet the gathering was filled with the same love and warmth of a wonderful Christmas among family at home.



We ate until we could eat no more. Throughout the meal, the television shared with us the news unfolding in South Sudan. What was initially called an “attempted coup” between the President and former Vice President, led to political and ethnic violence in several states around the young country. Through the screen, our eyes met with dead bodies, burned and lying in the streets. In between light-hearted chatter about children and Christmas traditions, our colleague shared stories about phone conversations with South Sudanese friends living in the areas experiencing the highest conflict. Stories of people taken from their vehicles at police stops and shot dead due to their ethnic affiliation.

And it was Christmas. And it was Christmas. Faced with horrific tales of military men executing lines of innocent civilians – and it was Christmas; reports of soldiers be-headed summarily and mass graves dug – and it was Christmas; over a hundred thousand people displaced from their homes, searching for clean water, food and shelter – and it was Christmas; UN peacekeepers killed while protecting civilians, and US soldiers wounded while rescuing American citizens – and it was Christmas. We longed to hear of progress towards a peaceful resolution, but instead learned of armed young men marching to attack towns filled with families hiding in their homes.

While it did not “look like” any of the Christmases in my memory, the birth of the Prince of Peace never felt more essential... thank God it was Christmas. Without Christmas, how could we continue living on this wounded earth? Christmas promises us a God completely “other” from the evil we were witnessing unfold, yet entirely present with each person hiding in their homes. Never before was it so comforting to know that there is Someone greater than us working for peace. There is indeed a supernatural force present and more powerful than any armed group of young people or any politician. A humble child born to a common family still proclaims that the ordinary person’s life means something to the God of the universe. Oh Lord, thank You for Christmas.

We finished the night with our friends and their neighbors drinking our second cup of tea, eating banana bread, swapping stories of life in South Sudan, and listening to the children share their excitement about paper masks and small plastic toys. We are so grateful for the invitation to spend Christmas with such a loving family. We shared together the realities of heart wrenching violence, tragedy, and death, as well as the gifts of friendship, neighbors, and new memories. We will never forget this Christmas. This Christmas, the Prince of Peace rescued our spirits from despair, and we were reminded that Jesus replaces hatred with love, death with life, and war with peace. Thank God for Christmas.

This year and in the years to come, let’s endeavor to keep Emmanuel, God with us, at the center of our efforts to reconcile a broken world. We cannot do it by ourselves. Amen.