



Christmas in Confinement

BY ROY BORGES

I celebrated my sixteenth consecutive Christmas behind the razor-wire fences of a Florida prison locked up in confinement—a prison inside a prison where the recalcitrant (troublemakers) are kept. In reality, anyone can find himself in “the hole” by irritating the wrong person.

Because I was going to be locked up in a cell 24 hours a day through Christmas, I figured nothing memorable could happen. I did get a five-minute shower three times weekly. Beyond that, there wasn’t much to look forward to that year.

Even in prison, I normally expected something good to occur over Christmas. My mom likes to send me two or three Christmas cards, and many of the friends I’ve met through pen-pal writing can be counted on to send greeting cards, too.

I decorated my cell with them, and it would put me in the Christmas spirit. I really missed the cards. No cards in confinement. I lost my mail privileges, too.

I wouldn’t get to watch *It’s a Wonderful Life* on TV either. No TV in confinement. I missed hearing my sister’s sweet, encouraging voice on the phone wishing me a merry Christmas. No phone calls in confinement.

The Christmas meal wasn’t too bad. One slice of canned turkey, a cup of sweet potatoes and a spoon of cranberry jelly were a departure from the regular mundane meals. But it didn’t match the treats I got from volunteers at the chapel. I especially hungered for the Cuban coffee and donuts one of the Spanish volunteers brought. No chapel services for those in confinement.

In a way, that Christmas was like the first Christmas 2,000 years ago. Most people went about their lives, paying their bills, cooking dinner, getting ready to go see relatives. Nobody noticed anything different, including the innkeeper who told a young couple to sleep in the barn.

Oh yeah, a few shepherds working the late night shift got a spectacular celestial show by some

angels who proclaimed, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will to men!” (Luke 2:14). The sheep probably knew something was up. Some

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wise men, eastern *Magi*, had begun their journey to Jerusalem, looking for someone called “The King of the Jews.” They had studied ancient manuscripts and knew that

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the Scriptures foretold the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

But for the rest of the world, it was just another day. No holiday music, no discount sales, no trees with lights, nothing special—except to be counted in a census by their Roman occupiers so they could be taxed. Maybe the Romans were having tax parties. But they didn't know that God had arrived—"and they shall call His name Immanuel...God with us" (Matthew 1:23, NKJV).

Christmas night in confinement, alone in my cell, I read in my Bible about Paul and Silas, who were also inside a prison. They "were praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners listened" (Acts 16:25). Despite their miser-

able predicament, they praised God.

The lights went out and I stared at the ceiling from my bunk, wondering if I could praise God in the midst of my circumstances. I could hear a mouse nibbling on some crackers I had left out for him. Then suddenly I heard a voice come out of the vent above the toilet. It was Andrew in the next cell.

"Merry Christmas, Roy," he said.

"Merry Christmas, Andrew," I replied.

"Do you know any Christmas songs?" Andrew asked.

"Yeah, I know a few."

"I'll sing one if you'll sing one," he said.

"Are you kidding? Have you been reading the Bible?" I asked incredulously.

"No, why?" Andrew replied.

"Never mind. What do you want to sing?"

"Joy to the World." And he sang every verse. I sang the chorus with him. Then it was my turn and I chose "Silent Night."

Then he sang "O Come All Ye Faithful." And I answered with "Feliz Navidad."

"Hey, I remember that one from the Christmas play last year. Wasn't that the song you sang? What was the name of that play?" asked Andrew.

"Yes, it was me. It was called *The Real Meaning of Christmas.*"

"That's right," Andrew recalled. "And a lot of people liked it. Boy, things have sure changed."

"You're right, but the real meaning of Christmas hasn't changed. It doesn't matter where you wake up or what day it is—God has arrived. Immanuel is with us. He is here to bless you, save you, heal you, grant you peace and do many more wonderful things."

"I have another song," Andrew said and sang "O Holy Night." It was completely silent in the quad as everyone listened. It was a moment I'll never forget. It reminded me of Paul and Silas and made me realize that every day is Christmas since God has arrived. It wasn't just another day, and I wasn't alone. Immanuel was in confinement with me, in my cell, blessing me. □

Roy Borges writes from a prison in Florida.



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