



In the Wrong Place?

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

Home for the holidays. As we contemplate family gathered around a festive table with a turkey or ham for the centerpiece, we have warm feelings. Home is where we want to be on that special day. Yet, with traffic jams and airline delays and cancellations, our dreams are often deflated. And even when everyone arrives safely, the holidays can turn into tension-filled times.

This past Christmas, with extended and blended family gathered together, a gift-exchange *faux pas*—the failure of one to buy a gift for another—led to hard feelings. Advice columns are filled with such stories. Why, I wondered, does this season create such high expectations and so much stress?

Was Mary stressed out, traveling on the dusty roads to Bethlehem and giving birth in a stable? Was she frustrated by impractical gifts brought by the wise men, and did she wonder what she was expected to give in return?

Sometimes, if we are properly attuned to the true message of the season, the stress can be transformed into *tender mercies*—mercies that drop from heaven like rain. As I reflected back on the hassles and hard feelings of this past holiday season, I was reminded of a profound illustration of the Incarnation.

It was three days before Christmas. Bernie May, a pilot serving Wycliffe Bible Translators in the Amazon jungle, was delivering emergency medical supplies to a remote village—his last assignment before returning to his wife and boys at a mission station six hours away.

The flight and the landing on the river in his pontoon plane had been uneventful. He had fulfilled his deed of mercy and was settling down for the night with a sense of satisfaction.

After a night's sleep in his make-shift hammock tied between two trees, he would be

rested for the flight home to his family. But he was awakened in the night. A steady rain had begun falling. Minutes turned into hours as he waited for dawn. But for two days and two nights he was stuck in the rainforest as the rain fell, with no break in the dense cloud cover that reached into the jungle canopy.

Wrapped in his soggy sleeping-bag, Bernie May was stressed out and consumed with loneliness and self-pity:

It was Christmas Eve, and night was descending on the jungle. There was no way I could get back home.

Back in Pennsylvania, my folks would have returned from church and Mother would be getting the turkey ready. Outside, the snow would be falling past the window. The big tree, with the star on top, would be standing, as always, in its corner.

But much closer than Pennsylvania were the ones he most wanted to gather into his arms. He had managed to radio his wife. He could hear the tears in her voice. She would tell the boys. Now he was alone again in the jungle—alone, but for the night sounds and his own anguish. “‘Oh God,’ he moaned, ‘I’m in the wrong place.’”

But as it turns out, he wasn’t in the wrong place. Had he been in the “right” place he might have missed out on a tender mercy—a profound lesson of the Incarnation.

That night, under my mosquito net I had a visitation from God—something like those shepherds must have had on the hills of Bethlehem. There were no angels, and no bright light.

But as I lay there in my hammock, desperately homesick, I felt I heard God say: “My son, this is what Christmas is all about. Jesus left heaven and on Christmas morning he woke up in the ‘wrong place’—a stable in Bethlehem.”

Christmas means leaving home, not going home. My only begotten Son did not come home for Christmas—he left his home to be with you.” □

—Ruth A. Tucker

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