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Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! Is your life marked by joy and celebration?



Maybe your Christmas Eve felt as (ab)normal as mine did this year; Dan and I sat down after dinner, lit a candle, sang some classic hymns, listened to a sermon, then concluded with Silent Night. We ate "fudge" as my

family would back home, had a Christmas cookie, some egg nog, then went to bed.

Matt Chandler was our guest preacher and he asked that question, “Is your life marked by joy and celebration?” I can barely relate to most of you as I’ve worn a mask for less than 24 hours in the past year, but this question is not meant to be answered circumstantially. So whether you found yourself disoriented half way around the world or you were stripped of your graduation, loved ones, or your daily routine, the question still stands: “Is your life marked by joy and celebration?”

Our church in Buffalo did a series focused on the people who missed the first Christmas; whether it was distraction, preoccupation, or worldly comfort, they all missed the joy and celebration of Jesus entering the world.

Personally, I have been most reminded of all that came through this sweet baby Immanuel. Apart from Christ, there is no right standing with God, no eternal life, no communion with the Father, no indwelling Holy Spirit, and quite honestly, I am not even Jewish, so I had no belonging to God in the first place. What joy ought fill us as we remember the birth of Christ. But does it mark our lives? I love that Chandler asked a very practical question, “is your life **marked** by joy and celebration?” He later rephrases it “gratitude and celebration”. Does the joy of redemption working itself out in all things stir about gratitude and celebration in and through you? I’ll let Chandler rap up his thoughts, then I’ll move on with my update.

“I want [for you] the deep rooted joy that can only be found in knowing that [Jesus] has come and that he is returning, and in the space in between, the spirit is present to embolden our witness via our joyfulness rooted in that hope. And that, that’ll make Christmas incredible for you!”

“There is a life for you where cynicism and anger and agitation have been driven out by gladness. And you can have that life if you want it... Unshakeable life-changing joy has been made available to you, not happiness, nothing thin; thick, robust, can have you praising in the morning when everything you think you need to survive right now has been taken from you. I’ve seen it with my eyes. Available to you, you need to only ask.”
For the full sermon: https://youtu.be/CJod-C5_4-E.



Christmas Eve Service!

Christmas

Christmas is celebrated here in the Laarim with food, goats, beer, and get together. I'm not sure when they first started celebrating Christmas or how much they know about it, but it is a well awaited day by many. We were often asked, "How many days til Christmas?" For Christmas Eve, we went to a handful of compounds to share the Christmas story, sing a couple songs, and pray. Dan and I celebrated Christmas morning by ourselves, sharing some candy with kids who came to the gate and giving some men their first ever cinnamon roll. In the early afternoon, we cooked some massive pots of rice and lentils then opened our gate to the awaiting kids and men. The men helped us decide it was best to reserve the food for adults and give the candy to kids. A few groups of older boys/men ate while everyone played games. Every 30 minutes or so, I would climb our water tower and throw out handfuls of candy; it was awesome! We continued to play as evening approached, but we still had a lot of food. Everyone sat down to eat in groups of six—thank you Jesus for the idea—then we sent them on their way with candy. There were two groups left to eat and there were two more servings of food, praise God! I sat for dinner with Yaba, our guard, talked to some guys who were lingering then did the dishes and went to bed.

Sunday Mornings

Aside from the holidays, we began gathering near our home on Sunday mornings for worship, prayer and time in God's word. The first week found Dan sick with malaria which meant I would go for it alone. It was intimidating but people showed up—most of them were just passing by which felt generally discouraging, but hey, people heard the story of creation and joined in on the songs. The following week found me alone again as Dan was sent to a clinic in Torit—he is back and well! The same passerbyers were not there that week though, so after two kids that walked with me to the meeting place went home, I sang alone under the tree awaiting

the church of the Laarim to gather. My thoughts wandered, but one by one they came til five of us sat and sang, then prayed, gave thanks, and talked about the story of Jesus' birth. It was encouraging. This past Sunday, some Laarim believers working with SIL on Bible translation in Juba came to town for Christmas and led their annual church services. We look forward to gathering again this Sunday to fellowship with and give praise to God.



Sunday soccer!

Here is a [Prayer Calendar for the month of January](#).

To the ends of the earth,

Joel

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