

MERRY CHRISTMAS

AROUND the FIRE

Winter 2021

RESCUE *the Equine* ★ MENTOR *the Child* ★ HOPE *for the Family* ★ EMPOWER *the Ministry*

The Light of the World

BY STEPHANIE VOTH

I've sensed the Lord asking me to share two separate encounters I recently experienced. In a way only Jesus could orchestrate, I experienced one right after the other. Each reflected a unique perspective that we as Believers often have the opportunity to choose in our own relationship with the Lord.

Kim asked if I could join her for an exciting Craigslist treasure hunt. Bright and early the next day she swooped into the Ranch driveway and scooped me up. As we began the long journey toward our destination, we prayed together. We both acknowledged this trip was not about items to purchase, but a unique form of ministry.

For most of an hour, we navigated the twists and turns of Oregon's beautiful landscape. We laughed at how we talk in the inevitable sisters in Christ "speed-speech" we always have after long-awaited times together.

Finally, we found the correct address at the bottom of a winding driveway. We slowly made our way up a gradual slope that led to a modest home overlooking the sagebrush covered valley below. The sweeping view was dramatic and powerful.

As we pulled up to the house, we were greeted by a tall, long-haired man with two tiny barking dogs at his feet.

In all the years I've seen Kim buy and sell goods, I've come to learn that the exchange is always an opportunity to share the love of Jesus with a person, no matter where their heart stands. I knew this trip would be no different.

Continued on page 2

Photo credit: Sarah Perez

The man greeted us warmly and started to explain the item he had for sale. As Kim listened, I could tell she was praying and listening for the Lord to share what He wanted her to say. She asked him a few open-door questions and he jumped into a lively discussion about his property and how he came to live in the guest house located on the large ranch. As he spoke, his dogs continued their shrill barking. Sensing that I needed to quell the distraction, I knelt down to engage them.

Instantly, they quieted. Their response encouraged me to stay in a kneeling position. From there, I could easily love the two fierce pups, and listen and pray as the man spoke to Kim.

He talked like a machine gun. He shared much of his life story of traveling internationally for work. It was clear he was lonely and frustrated. Reloading with a quick breath, he explained how he left the corporate world in his rearview mirror and chose the less stressful job of managing an organic farm. I saw Kim's eyes light up at a newfound common ground—the love of gardening. Anyone who knows Kim understands she cannot talk about gardening without mentioning the Gardener . . . the Creator of all the universe . . . God Almighty.

Kim gently interjected about loving to dig in the dirt and how she experienced God's closeness through what He has made. Respectfully waiting for each breath the man took between thoughts, she spoke encouragement and guided him toward the love of God. Every time he heard her words, the farmer responded with a not-so-hidden over talk. It was clear the message wasn't one he was allowing to sink into his heart.

The man shifted into a new gear of talking louder and faster. He shared his passion of caring for the earth based on several beliefs that clearly revealed he wasn't a follower of Jesus Christ. We both sensed that he didn't know the love that God had for him . . . yet.

I continued to pray.

By negatively mentioning his stepdad on more than one occasion, Kim saw the opportunity to share an abbreviated version of her testimony.

She said, "When I was nine-years-old, my dad murdered my mother, then took his own life. That's the day I cried out to Jesus . . . and *He came* . . . and knelt in the dirt beside this broken child. The Lord of redeeming love took my hand, and He has never—ever—let go."

The man's body jerked backward as if he'd been shot. He stuttered, momentarily stumbling to find his words, then started loudly spewing what he believed. Each statement that poured from his mouth felt like word-vomit he couldn't control or stop. As if stoking his own angry fire with the kindling of his dark, demonic beliefs, his fury welled up against what Kim had said until he finally boiled over in white-hot rage. Throwing his hands in the air, he nearly shouted at us—and then turned on his heel and stormed back into the house.

All she did was tenderly speak the name of Jesus—and how He had impacted *her* life.

She didn't question his ideas or challenge the dark blasphemy which he believed. She simply spoke the Name above all names—Jesus—the only true Savior of this world.

John 1:5 states, "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*" (NIV)

Sadly, instead of moving toward the Light of genuine hope, the man chose to move away in anger and leave the conversation.

"*So Jesus said to them, 'The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.'*" (John, 12:35-36, ESV)

Friends, when we choose to walk in darkness, the light makes us agitated, annoyed . . . even angry. The loving Light of God compels us to change. We can't live in the dark—then experience His Light shining on us—and stay the same. That would be like crossing a highway at night. Once we see headlights—our eyes adjust—and we see all of our surroundings differently. We can no longer pretend to "not see" what we have clearly seen. Likewise,

in our innermost being, when we walk in the light, we are no longer afraid of the darkness or what it holds. Neither are we a prisoner to its bonds. The power of the Light allows us to stand and move with confidence through dark circumstances.

In John 14:6-7a Jesus says, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well.*" (NIV)

It was heartbreaking to hear the demonic lies this beloved boy had completely succumbed to. He had been duped—literally blinded—by the enemy, and was willing to fight anyone who disagreed with him. He refused to look at the Light of the Lord. Instead, he completely focused on the blackness that surrounded him . . . digging deeper and deeper into the pit of the enemy's lethal deceptions.

Kim and I climbed back into her truck and left with deeply saddened hearts. Although we shared the truth of Jesus' love, the organic farmer didn't receive the Gospel or embrace God's grace that day. We knew the Lord was pursuing this wayward son with such almighty compassion that He sent us on a 45 minute drive just to find him and tell him how deeply he was loved by Jesus—the King of kings.

During our return trip, we prayed nearly the entire drive home that—in God's perfect timing—He would grow those planted seeds of truth. We also prayed the man's heart would soften and through his earthly passion for farming, he would come to know the eternal passion Jesus had for Him. We prayed for nearly the entire trip home, beckoning the Holy Spirit to encounter this man in a way only He can.

Looking back, I can see how it was a beautiful method of worship. Although we couldn't comfort that man's heart, we could stand confident in our belief that Jesus was still at work and still worthy of our adoration and praise.

In Luke 6:45 Jesus said, "*A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*" (NIV)

That day, we sought to encourage a struggling son into the freedom of a loving relationship with the Father. Even though he didn't accept the hope we offered, his choice didn't diminish our attitude toward God. It only encouraged us to press in and seek freedom from the Lord for this broken-hearted man.

Not long after this encounter, I had a stirring conversation with a parent of one of our session kiddos. He was a man whom I've come to know well over the last few seasons through his girls participation in our session program. He called simply to thank our team for loving his two young daughters so well. I let him know that it's our joy to be able to share God's love and kindness with those who walk up the driveway. And, it is by His grace we get to work here at Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch.

He paused from thanking the staff and me to say, "After her last session, my youngest daughter told me she asked Jesus into her heart. She came home with a new Bible and she's been asking me to read it to her. We've been reading it together ever since . . . and I am realizing there's a lot I didn't know about the Bible."

My jaw dropped, "That's it!" I thought. That's the "childlike faith" Jesus talks about when He said, "*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*" (Luke 18:16-17, NIV)

This little girl is 7 years-old . . . and she gets it!

She knows the Gospel. Her actions prove it penetrated her heart and caused a shockwave of love to go throughout her life, her relationships, her speech, her identity. For her, everything has changed because she has wholeheartedly chosen to follow Jesus.

In reflecting on these two very different conversations, I realized sometimes I'm like the man Kim and I met earlier. When seeking God for direction—if time drags on longer than expected—sometimes I try to out-logic the Lord. When I don't get the answer

I want or don't get my way—I can get irritated at God. I'm not saying this to condemn the man—but to say I have been in that place. I've been irritated because deep inside I haven't yet fully grasped the true concept of His grace.

Then God recaptures and realigns my attention. He did this through the conversation with the compassionate father who called to tell me about his daughter's choice to receive Jesus' love.

God reminded me of His unchanging grace through a 7 year-old girl. She wholeheartedly accepted, understood and desired to tell everyone she knew about the Good News that transformed her heart.

She wanted the people in her life to read the eternity-changing Word of God with her. She wanted her daddy to know she is holding fast to the unwavering belief that Jesus loves her so much He chose to die for her on the cross so someday she can be with Him in Heaven.

Friends, when we sin, when we take our eyes off Jesus—we—complicate life.

*"Jesus told him,
I am the way,
the truth and the life.
No one can come
to the Father except
through me."*

John 14:6

Just like the man we encountered, when we do this, our world darkens with our own anger, fear, worldly wisdom, and logic. Often, within this increasingly dark realm, we want to blame everyone and everything—even God—for the pain we're in.

Yet, we have another choice. We can also embrace the faith of a child and run and jump into the outstretched arms of the Author of Light Himself.

"This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all." (1 John 1:5, NLT)

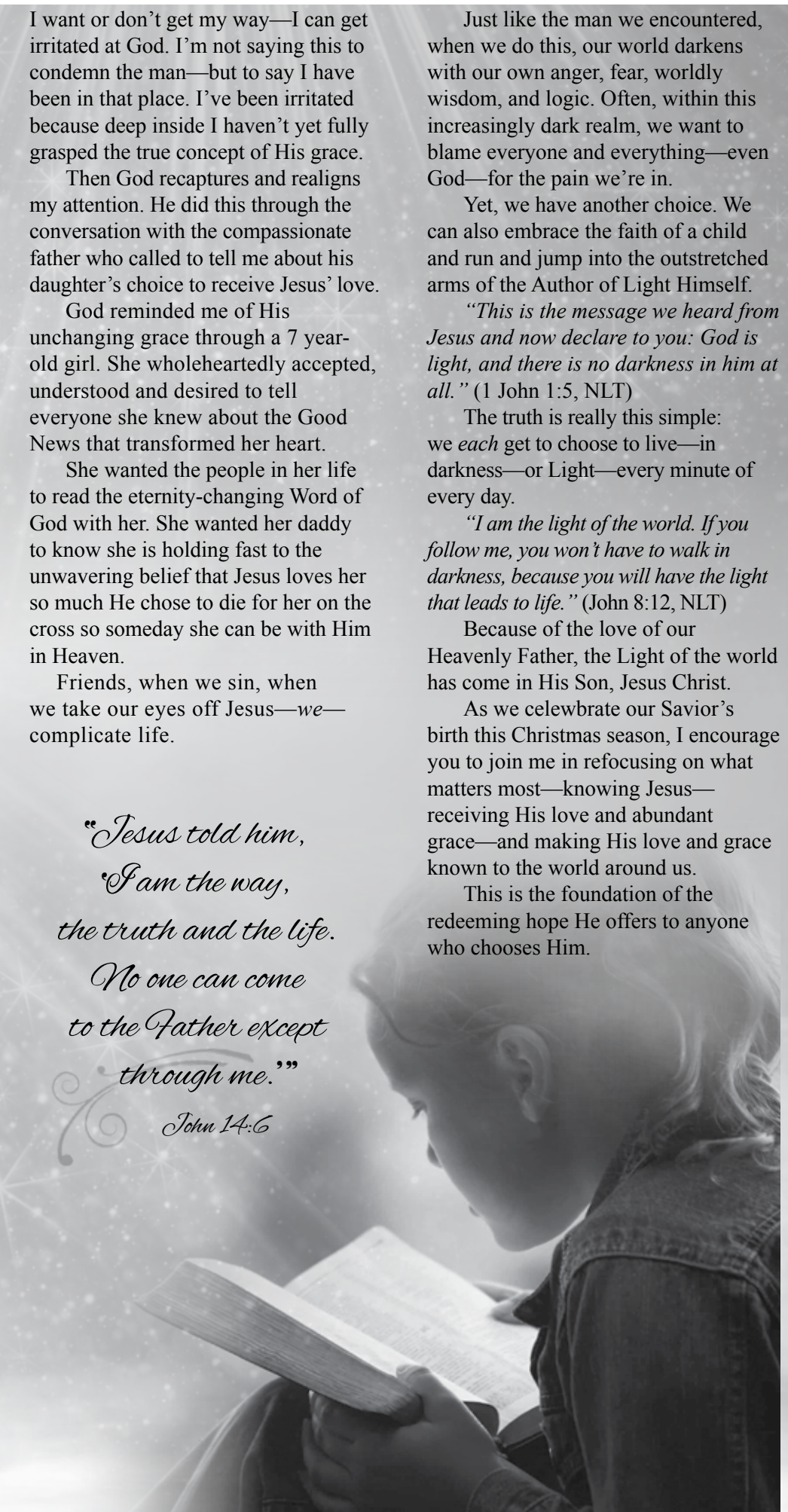
The truth is really this simple: we *each* get to choose to live—in darkness—or Light—every minute of every day.

"I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life." (John 8:12, NLT)

Because of the love of our Heavenly Father, the Light of the world has come in His Son, Jesus Christ.

As we celebrate our Savior's birth this Christmas season, I encourage you to join me in refocusing on what matters most—knowing Jesus—receiving His love and abundant grace—and making His love and grace known to the world around us.

This is the foundation of the redeeming hope He offers to anyone who chooses Him.



Don't Be Afraid—Take Courage—I AM HERE

By Troy Meeder

In a world filled with seatbelts, air bags, bike helmets and safety locks, the adventurous must search relentlessly for the raw, unbridled thrill of the unknown. For any heart that seeks the excitement of the journey, one must leave the safe embrace of the familiar and venture into the realm of chance. It's difficult to truly experience the passion of exploration while lying on the couch navigating the intricacies of a popular video game or binge-watching sports or a favorite show. While certainly comfortable and relaxing, the powerful release of the adventurous heart will not happen within the safe confines of the habitual.

For this heart, often the siren call of the wild is from the sea. I'm drawn *by* the sea *to* the sea. Although daunted by its power, I'm profoundly respectful of the deep. My heart soars when I'm welcomed by the ocean's powerful embrace. The reception of being allowed to ride the living rise and fall of the sea is overwhelming.

It was before dawn. Kim and I were eager to take our dear friends Evan and Stephanie into the beloved wilderness in which we've become so familiar, the powerful realm of the North Pacific Ocean.

As with every Merchant Marine Captain, I'd done my research prior to our early morning departure. Our route to sea would take us through the notorious Coquille River Bar. The small and seemingly innocuous transfer from river to sea on the coast of Oregon has become a watery grave for many.

The weather was calm. The surf manageable. While the retreating tide was not favorable, I was confident, perhaps even arrogant, that our 30-foot boat was capable. Buoyed with the human tools of education, information and self-assurance, we set out into the gray of the morning.

Rounding the entrance of the marina and entering the river, I gained my first view west into the distance. The bar through which we must pass is a place where an incoming ocean collides with an outgoing river. What I could make out in the low light was not what I expected. Rolling four-to-five-foot waves were accompanied by seven-to-eight-foot steep rising swells. A thin, illuminated white line on the horizon gave witness of breaking water pounding the entrance of the Coquille River.

I could feel within my heart a similar collision occurring. My rising alarm rushed against my bolstered sense of trust in our vessel. By choosing to trust my desire more than my warning, I felt released to take a closer look.

With growing caution, I moved our boat toward the threatening waves. Seeing an opening through their white teeth, I felt capable of safely navigating us out to sea. By waiting for the passageway to reach us, I throttled the twin 200 horsepower motors into the oncoming seas.

The first set of advancing waves lifted the boat and rolled below our bow. Moving forward with power, I knew we still had a long way to go to safely cross the treacherous bar. When navigating the sea, it's critical to measure, gauge and time each approaching wave. If your determinations are wrong, the sea will consume you and your poor decision into its cold depths. If your determinations are right, you get to live another day. Motoring past the south jetty, I watched in dread as the next set rose.

Instantly, it became deadly apparent . . . *I got it wrong.*

In Mathew 14:22-27, the disciples found themselves in a situation no less deadly or terrifying.

Jesus had just fed more than 5,000 people with a handful of bread and fish. After He shared with the masses, He instructed His disciples to return to the boat and "cross to the other side of the lake." Jesus then went up into the hills to pray. Night fell while He was in the wilderness—with His Father.

"Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves." (vs. 24, NLT)

Not unlike the North Pacific, the cold embrace of the Sea of Galilee was becoming very real to the men on that vessel. The ferocity of the storm assaulted the small boat they navigated. The waves rose to lethal heights. The disciples were desperate. It was dark. Fear gripped them as they were violently pitched and tossed through each growing swell. Death loomed.

And yet—in that desperate time—*Jesus came to them.*

“About three o’clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. When the disciples saw Him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, ‘It’s a ghost!’ But Jesus spoke to them at once. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ He said. ‘Take courage. I AM HERE!’”
(vs. 25-27, NLT, emphasis added)

Amid the raging tempest . . . Jesus came. In the darkest part of night, at just the right moment, when all seemed lost, Jesus declared to the disciples *and* to the storm, *“I—AM—HERE!”*

Jesus met them *IN* the storm . . . and He will meet you too.

The enemy of our soul might cause the storm—but the *Savior* of our soul—always finishes it.

It is JESUS who holds all things together. (Col. 1:17)
When we choose to stand in His presence, HE takes dominion over the raging storms in our lives and He will hold us together too.

We just passed the south jetty and were now facing the powerful remnants of a storm far out to sea that rushed in to overcome our boat. I looked up and saw three huge walls of green towering before us. With no choice to turn around and retreat, I could only throttle forward.

The first breaker lifted the boat high above the sea around us. We dropped hard into the deep trough behind it. Rising like an angry mountain of water, the next wave stood so high that all I could see was a crushing torrent of green. There was no escape. I was face to face with the consequences of my prior poor decision. I had momentarily placed my faith in a *thing* instead of my Almighty Savior . . . and now the storm was upon us.

Rising within my chest, in mirrored unison to the wall of death before us, was a wave of pure terror. Steering directly into the oncoming wall of water, I was certain we would capsize.

**“WITHIN THIS BEAUTIFUL
SEASON OF GIVING,
BETWEEN YOU AND
JESUS, THE MOST
VALUABLE GIFT YOU CAN
SHARE—IS TO OPEN THE
DOOR OF YOUR HEART—
AND INVITE HIM IN.”**

“Don’t be afraid . . . take courage . . . I am here”

“I—AM—HERE!” The voice of my Savior rang in my heart. I felt my hand push the throttles forward and our boat rose nearly vertical on the face of the wave. The breaker rushed viciously beneath us and with nothing but empty space under the hull, we fell from what had been the summit and crashed down violently into the next trough. Seawater thundered in every direction as our 4-ton vessel was crushed against the ocean’s surface. Behind me, I could hear the voice of my bride, Kim, calling on the only One who could see us through the storm.

“Jesus—Jesus—JESUS!”

My hands shook but remained at the helm. More waves approached. I powered us forward, dodging and weaving through each set, until they started to ease. It felt like three lifetimes had passed before we reached the relative safety of the open ocean. In those moments, I thought we would surely die. Hours later, with every recollection of how close we came to compete ruin, I could feel my knees trembling. My mistake nearly destroyed us—but Jesus’ love completely saved us.



Friends, whether the storm you face is the consequences of your own poor decisions—or—of no choice of your own . . . KNOW THIS: there is *no* storm in this life that Jesus cannot see you through. There is no turbulent circumstance He cannot overcome. There is no broken relationship He cannot redeem. There is nothing He cannot heal . . . except one thing . . . *one*.

Jesus cannot heal the pain *you* will not give Him.

Revelation 3:20 states that Jesus stands at the door of our heart and knocks, waiting for US to invite Him into our lives. He doesn't break the door down, nor does He leave. He simply waits for us to welcome Him into our life and circumstances.

The Disciples had done exactly what Jesus had asked them to do. They were not acting in arrogance or pride. And yet, the storm still materialized. And within their storm, they cried out to Jesus—and He came and rescued them. I momentarily placed my trust in a boat—something other than God—and the result was disastrous! But when we cried out to Jesus—He still came—and rescued us.

During this Christmas season, many are facing lethal storms—perhaps a crushing torrent is rushing down on *you*. No matter the cause, no matter what you face, no matter your black circumstance . . . you can call on the Name above all names. You can open the door of your heart to the One who's been knocking. You can invite the Author of redemption into your life and allow your personal storm to break on the ROCK that is Jesus Christ. And you can ask Him to lead you through the storm and into the deep water of His Almighty love for you.

Will you? Will you open the door and invite Jesus to be the Lord of your life?

"As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. For God says, 'At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.' Indeed, the 'right time' is now. Today is the day of salvation." (2 Cor. 6:1-2, NLT, emphasis added)

Within this beautiful season of giving, between you and Jesus, the most valuable gift you can share—is to open the door of your heart—and invite Him in.

His name is Emmanuel, which means "God with us." Because of love, the Son of God came as a man, lived a perfect life and laid that life down to break the power of our sin. Because of love, He rose again and stands at the door of every heart. And because of love, we can each invite Jesus in to be with us, to heal us and redeem us.

Emmanuel—God IS with you. On this day—will YOU choose to be with Him?

Jesus is no longer the tiny babe in a manger. He is the risen, living King of kings . . . and He is the One who calms every storm.

With deepest love, Kim and I pray that during this miraculous season—you will open the door wide—and invite HIM in. Merry Christmas Beloved.

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2022 Calendars are available!

Dear extended Ranch family, it's our joy to share the essence of what Jesus does here at Crystal Peaks. Captured within this poignant calendar are "God breathed" moments in the lives of our kids, volunteers and staff. Each month features a Ranch photograph paired with children's quotes and encouraging Bible verses.

As our gift to you, we'd like to offer each household one free calendar. We pray the Lord will use it to bless and hearten all who see it. To order a calendar, please go to our website at: www.cpyr.org and click "Ranch Life," on our home page. Or, mail your request to: Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch, 19344 Innes Market Road, Bend, Oregon 97703.

If you wish, additional calendars can also be ordered. Donations are greatly appreciated to help offset the \$8 production cost. All international orders outside the US/Canada will be required to pay a \$5 shipping fee.

Many thanks to each of you—near and abroad—for shouldering with us in this ministry of hope.



All stories written in "Around the Fire" newsletter are true. Some of the names have been changed to protect individual privacy. "Around the Fire" newsletter stands on the Word of God. Multiple translations of the Holy Bible are used to assure clarity for our readership. Each author is afforded the right to choose the translation that best suits their submission.