

My Front-Line Christmases

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December 18, 2016



Photo date and location unknown

At church today we sang Christmas songs and wore reindeer hats. It wasn't always that way in the early days.....

My first Christmas in the church was 1978, on a fundraising team in Tennessee. Our regional MFT commander was Mr. Nakai and his motto was "Never day off". So our captain, Tim Forster, said "Maybe we'll sing a couple of Christmas songs in the van on the way to our area." The team mother had a few things to say about that, so we ended up sitting in our hotel room in the morning eating some of our fundraising chocolate.

Then we went out and knocked on people's doors for a few hours. We went to black area, and people usually shouted "Come on in!" when we knocked on the door. Some were mighty surprised to see us fundraising on Christmas Day, but a few people did donate and get candy from us. I think if we had tried that in white area, they would have called the cops on us.

The second Christmas I experienced in the church I was still on MFT, working at a mall, for Original World Products. I had wood roses in little glass tube vases and butterfly domes. I was by myself at the booth in the mall every day of the week, every hour it was open. One brother came to help the last week. On Christmas Day, we found a busy intersection, put a few wood roses and butterflies on the hood of our car, and sat there for several hours. We got some sales from people on the way to Grandma's house,

needing a last-minute present. Then we went to eat at a Waffle House, about the only place in town that was open.

I remember, among the well-dressed people stopping for a bite on the way to visit family, one man in the corner with a full ashtray and a book of crossword puzzles in front of him. He was clearly trying to pass the time any way he could, without thinking about it too much. It was the first time that I realized some people are completely alone on Christmas.

My third Christmas is the one I remember most. I was working at a mall by myself, again, and I had a display in my van. I drove around to find a spot to set up. There was about a foot of snow on the ground, and it was just around freezing. I came across a store that had one of those portable arrow-shaped signs where you added your own letters. The sign was lit up, and it had a plug.

“Great!” I thought. So I plugged my clip lights in and set up a display of wood roses. Then I stood there, ankle deep in slush, and waited. I could see my breath as people were driving by, polished cars full of dressed up adults and kids. All on their way to somewhere warm and cozy, good food and presents. And here I was, moving my wet feet to keep them warm, watching my breath.

You couldn't hear anything, but clearly some kids in the back seat were asking “Mommy, why is that man standing outside on Christmas?” and there were a lot of “What is he doing??” looks. Some disapproved, some ignored me, a few felt sorry for me.

And I could have felt sorry for myself, too. Alone, away from home, not even with brothers and sisters around me. I was going back to a motel room by myself. Uncertain if I was going to find a place where I could eat, or it would be a 7/11 dinner.

But as I thought about this being Jesus' birthday, I thought of those manger setups on church corners, with animals, hay bales, shepherds and the baby Jesus. This was not how the Son of Man was supposed to be welcomed into this world. He could have frozen to death. And in the rest of Bethlehem, people were warm and cozy and eating away.

So I thought “Jesus, you were born like this, outside the warmth that most people enjoyed. I'm glad I can share this time with you, out in the cold like it really was for you. You were never really accepted by the respectable folks during your life, for all that we worship you now. So I'd rather be cold out here with you right now, and getting strange looks, than inside and warm.”

It also helped that I grew up in Canada.

I don't remember the rest of the day. If I ate anywhere, it was probably in a Chinese restaurant. Nobody else was open on Christmas in the South in those days, except the Waffle House.

But I'm also glad that we did enough of that back when, so we can now enjoy sitting in church with our families, singing Christmas songs together.