

More than just ornaments

By KAREN O. ALLEN

When it comes to decorating Christmas trees, some people decorate with a theme, or a color, or perhaps a time period. Not me! Call me simple but I just pull out the same ornaments year after year with a few additions here and there.

Decorating the tree is one of my favorite Christmas pastimes because it allows me to reflect upon circumstances, places, or people as I trim the tree with familiar ornaments. For instance, the bicycle-for-two reminds me of the bicycle that was purchased when my husband and I were still dating. We collected loose change in a jar at the end of each day until we finally got enough money to buy a tandem bicycle. Needless to say, we had many cheap but fun dates! The candy cane always brings a smile to my face as I reminisce about the game my sisters and I played growing up. It was like "hide-and-seek" but with a single candy cane. We got rather creative in our hiding places. There was never a prize – just the thrill of it.

I have many ornaments from places my husband and I have traveled through the years. There's the mountain scene with the flying angel from Alaska and the poinsettia wreath from Hawaii. There's also the cobalt blue Madonna and child from Greece and the pewter Viking ship from Norway as well as the colorful crepe elephant from India. Each ornament holds treasured memories of wonderful trips.

One ornament never fails to make my eyes tear-up. It's the ceramic set from Ireland my Daddy bought for each of his three daughters. I still have the handwritten note he attached to the box. The year before he died he took our entire family to Ireland to see and experience a taste of our Irish heritage. I can vividly remember hearing his jolly laugh as he watched us all enjoying ourselves.



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Ah, there's the oversized glitter-painted glass "Joy" ornament made by my niece at the age of 8 (she's now 20) and the gold star from my former boss's son who came to help decorate one year since his family did not celebrate Christmas. Oh, how his eyes sparkled as he added the silver tinsel. Of course there are numerous ornaments, most with pictures, in the shapes of bones and breeds for our beloved pets through the years. And there's the personalized plaster clown – the last of the homemade ornaments my husband and I made during the early years of our marriage. What fun I thought it would be to do a Christmas project together. How could so much fun turn out to be so disastrous?

The glass ball with the pink ribbon inside will always hold a special place in my heart as a breast cancer survivor. But the ornament with the most symbolic and significant meaning of all is the nail tied with a red ribbon representing the eternal gift of God's only Son. No other ornaments can compare. Glory to God!

An expectation for all year

By LAUREN SHEEHAN

Party stores that start selling Christmas garb in August perplex me. Really? It is barely time for the back to school supplies, and they are already featuring the partridge in a pear tree! Yet, I suppose some could say the same for a tradition I hold.

I confess that I listen to my favorite Christmas song year round. In the car, at home, I even subject my elementary school students to the lyrics of "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" for nine months each year. While I would feel ashamed if my choice tune was about a snowman or a reindeer, I proudly sing along and soak in the words of this, typically, seasonal song.

As a child, I started the countdown to Christmas as soon as my mom's 300-page Spiegel magazine arrived. I would tear through the pages, marking the items that would be on my Christmas list that year. December 25 was indeed "long expected." Today, however, this phrase reminds me that the birth of Jesus was something generations of people anticipated for hundreds of years.

Many must have thought that the Redeemer would be born in a place that would equate to His majesty, yet God chose for His Son to be born in a dirty stable. "Born a child, and yet a King" as the song says, this baby's entry was, indeed, triumphant no matter what the ambiance might have been lacking. What a beautifully humble picture this is to envision all through the year – and yet another justification for my iPod playlist.

Our lives, year round, are riddled with trouble and trial. This year I have watched a young friend die of breast cancer, a family wade through infertility issues and many friends struggle with depression. But the nativity story is one that brings life and hope to us all year long. "Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth Thou



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art" is a sweet reminder that Jesus was not only the answer to the ancient Israelites' prayer for a deliverer but that He is also the answer to our prayers. Any prayers we might have prayed for strength, hope or consolation were answered, wrapped in the swaddling blankets in Bethlehem. Jesus is the only One who is able to sustain and satisfy our deepest longings.

One more quick confession: I display a nativity scene in my home all year long. It is a sweet reminder of the humility of God and the hope He brings in the story of His coming. So, party stores, forgive me. Hang up your reindeer in July because my Christmas décor will be displayed then, too.



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