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Holiday hospital stay brings an incarnate experience of powerless nativity

by Teresa Rhodes McGee

Soul Seeing
Christmas 2013

"I'm sorry, but you will miss Christmas this year" said the petite, red-haired doctor standing by my hospital bed. "You have pancreatitis. We will keep you as comfortable as possible, but the soonest we can send you home is Dec. 26."

I was sick enough to know I needed to be hospitalized, but along with a few other things flashing before my eyes, I saw the presents under the tree, heard "Silent Night" at Christmas Eve Mass, smelled the turkey in the oven, and felt the expectation of Christmas morning. I had put a lot of work into this year's Christmas and we would now have to wait to celebrate it until the days when other people are returning items, shopping for sales and prematurely putting their trees out for the garbage men.

Just as quickly as those thoughts came, they disappeared. Instead of baking Christmas cookies and running last-minute errands, I had been thrust into an incarnate experience of powerless nativity that transcended a calendar date. All I could do was let go, something that is easy enough in the immediacy of an illness like pancreatitis.

Hospital time for a patient unfolds without the usual markings of a day. Midnight feels like noon, dawn and twilight overlap and it all begins to feel like one long day, especially when treatment precludes the delivery of meal trays and sleep is elusive. I depended on the presence of family, friends and the hospital staff to keep me aware of the specifics of dates and time, even on Christmas Eve. That morning, Sonia had come in to clean my room and told me she would be working Christmas Day because she needed the extra holiday pay. She lived with her daughter and grandson and they were immigrants from the Ukraine. She was happy when I asked about Christmas traditions in her country. A few hours later, a priest friend

phoned me on his way to celebrate the first liturgy of Christmas and he prayed that I would "feel the presence of Christ on this tender night."

My husband, Dick, arrived after Christmas Eve Mass, lugging a floral arrangement from my brother and his family in one hand and holding a bag of gifts from himself and our sons under his other arm. The first gift was a small, frosted glass Christmas tree that lit up from within and cast changing colors on my tray side table. There was also a Christmas necklace and a red and green felt hat with bells that lit up and in a tinny voice belted out, "Ho, ho, ho, we are Santa's elves!" I triggered the singing by accident and unable to silence it, I stuffed the hat under my pillow as we laughed on that most tender night, desperately trying not to wake up anyone who had the good grace to be asleep.

After Dick left, I watched the changing glow of my tiny tree -- red and green and white -- throughout the night. I slept in fits and starts. Even with my eyes closed, I could perceive the shadow of those colors in a wordless connection to all who watch and wait, suffer, pray and experience joy in difficult circumstances that marked the birth of Emmanuel. I prayed: "Give them peace."

The next morning, in my Christmas fashion statement of a hospital gown, I pushed my IV pole into the hall. Sonia put her hands on her heart and said, "Merry Christmas, dear." I slowly traversed the hallways like a shepherd at the end of his long night's journey to Bethlehem, and grateful that someone had decorated the nursing station with a string of twinkling lights. I was going to recover. My IV pole and I moved prayerfully past neatly scrubbed rooms like empty tombs and the occupied hospice beds barely visible in the morning light.

Those initial steps left me too tired to eat the festive red Jell-O that was my first food in six days. Christmas afternoon with Dick and our sons was quiet, simple love incarnate, the essence of Word made flesh.

As predicted, I was discharged the following day, elf hat in hand. I had missed the usual celebrations of Christmas but in their absence had received precious gifts invisible to the eye. The experience of nativity, epiphany and, for that matter, Good Friday and Easter are not limited to a particular day on the calendar or traditional ways of marking the feast. How often we miss the true depth and length of Christmas because we stop too soon in the story.

I learned that week that Christmas unfolds over time and through liturgical seasons with multicolored lights of love, joy, pain, poverty, displacement, violence, exile and poignant hope. My corridor journey reminded me that revelation occurs through what Zachariah calls in his canticle "the tender compassion of our God" that "guides our feet in the way of peace."

This must be especially true when we are weary and, like the pregnant Mary, our journey feels impossibly long. Regardless of the date on the calendar, Christ is being born.

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[Teresa Rhodes McGee is alive and well and celebrating Christmas 2013 with her family in Ossining, N.Y. Her books include *Mysteries of the Rosary in Ordinary Life*.]

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