

# A Word From Aluva

*A Correspondence from a Young Adult Missionary in India*

## Christmas Comes to Kerala



It is Sunday night, two weeks before Christmas, and it's late. My sari rests in a heap on my bedroom floor, relieved, I'm sure, to be free of the pleats and pins that have constricted it for the past three days. And I, too, am glad to be free of those pleats and pins (not to mention the need to appeal for help in getting dressed – but you already know that story). But that off-white sari and I are good friends now. We've been together for three days straight, and, together, we have sung, danced, and played musical instruments; we have been blinded by blinking lights and stilled by the soft whispers of a candlelit sanctuary; together, over the past three days, we have laughed, and we have cried. And this is all simply because Christmas has come to Kerala.

Christmas comes differently here. It does not come with blinking lights and bustling shoppers. It does not come with bell-ringing Santa Clauses or confused babies sitting on his lap for the first time in the middle of the crowded mall. It does not come with buffets full of food or piles of presents. It definitely doesn't come with a snowfall and a drop in the temperature – not even a single degree. Christmas in Kerala comes quietly – not with bright, blinking lights, but with soft, shining stars; not with shouts of shoppers, but with carols of choirs. It is amidst these choirs that I have spent my weekend, and it is with these carols that I have received my first glimpse of Christmas in Kerala.

Friday evening was the YMCA Christmas Carol Service. I donned my off-white sari and headed out into the warm winter night to attend this three-hour medley of area organizations' performances. There was a children's choir, comprised of the most darling little girls dressed in red tops and hair bands and the most precious little boys dressed in white shirts and black bowties. I was brought to tears when they sweetly sang a familiar Christmas tune. It was a beautiful moment. Next was a choir of young men who ended their portion with "Deck the Halls." They belted out "Fa la la la la" with amazing gusto, and I had to chuckle to myself when I noticed the significant decrease in volume and confidence throughout the rest of the song. But what joy it brought me! Toward the end of the service, the Chacko Homes Ecumenical Choir, of which I am a part, sang two beautiful songs as a sort of preview to our service, which was held the next day.

Saturday evening, I donned that off-white sari once again and headed just down the hall from my own bedroom to the Chacko Homes chapel, where the ecumenical choir was gathering for one final practice before our audience arrived. Nobody thought we would make it when the power went out, not once, but twice, in the hour we had. But when the audience arrived, we were ready. If our notes weren't all in tune and our tempos weren't all consistent, our hearts were sure in it. We sang our praises to the baby Jesus in both English and Malayalam, and that combination was a reminder to me that Jesus was sent not for those who live in certain countries or can speak certain languages, but for the entire world – Malayalis, *madamas*, and everyone else. After closing with "Silent Night," I had a cup of *chai* and a *samosa* and headed back to my room, where I fell soundly and happily asleep.

And tonight – very soon, in fact – I am bound to do the same. I've just returned from the college chapel, where the very talented college choir, accompanied by a nervous clarinet player, performed their carol service for a full house of students, faculty, and members of the community. It was a joyful event. The chapel was decorated with flowers and candles, as well as lights, stars, and a giant Christmas tree – complete with sparkling garland and balloons! The church was gorgeous, the songs were beautiful, the message was meaningful, and the moment was perfect.

When the service was over, the choir stayed. A few short speeches were made, and then, to my surprise, I was asked to say a few words of my own. I wasn't prepared, and, as I stood up, I didn't know what I would say. But my heart led the way, and, with tears threatening to spill with each word I uttered, I simply said, "Thank you for welcoming me into this group. This is the most difficult time for me to be away from home. In the over three months that I've been here, I have not missed my family more than I do right now. But the way you have welcomed and loved me has given me a new understanding of 'family,' and, as much as I miss mine at this time of year, at this moment, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else than here in this chapel with you."



## Reflection: God's Great Gifts

It is the season of giving. And at this time, when that giving might have us preoccupied with wish lists, shopping malls, and selecting the most festive wrapping paper, I found these words, written by Max Lucado, a wonderful reminder of the greatest gifts we've ever received – those that were never on our wish lists, those that cannot be found at the mall, those that are too glorious to ever be wrapped in paper, those that are gifts from heaven.

Why did he do it? A shack would have sufficed, but he gave us a mansion. Did he have to give the birds a song and the mountains a peak? Was he required to put stripes on the zebra and the hump on the camel? Why wrap creation in such splendor? Why go to such trouble to give such gifts? Why do you? You do the same. I've seen you searching for a gift. I've seen you stalking the malls and walking the aisles. I'm not talking about the obligatory gifts. I'm talking about that extra-special person and that extra-special gift. Why do you do it? You do it so the heart will stop. You do it so the jaw will drop. You do it to hear those words of disbelief: "You did this *for me?*" That's why you do it. And that is why God did it. Next time a sunrise steals your breath or a meadow of flowers leaves you speechless, remain that way. Say nothing and listen as heaven whispers, "Do you like it? I did it just for you."

*Thanks be to God for his gift that is too wonderful for words. 2 Corinthians 9:15*

## Language Lesson

I wanted to teach some Christmas words this month, but as the only one I know is *Christmas* (which just happens to mean Christmas), that will not be possible. So we'll do animals instead. There were many present at the birth of Jesus, after all.

Cow = *pasu* (pah-soo` )

Ox = *kala* (kah` -lah)

Horse = *kuthira* (koo` -tee-ruh)

Goat = *koladu* (ko-lahdh` )

(Almost don't pronounce that 'u,' but end the word with a very hard 'd' sound.)

Sheep = *chemmariyadu* (chay-mah-ree-yahdh` )  
(Ditto about the 'u' here.)

Dog = *naya* (nah` -yah)

Cat = *pucha* (poo` -chah)

Dove = *pravu* (prah` -vuh)

Next month, we'll learn a few more. ☺

## How To Celebrate Christmas in Kerala

This section is devoted to some of the very important lessons that I have learned living in India. Without this knowledge, I probably wouldn't get through a day, let alone an entire year. Read on to learn how to celebrate Christmas the Kerala way.

- First of all, break the "Merry Christmas" habit; people here seem to want "Happy Christmases" instead!
- Join a choir so you can enjoy singing all of your old English favorites, as well as learn some new Malayalam carols. (Just hum the melodies if you can't pronounce the words; people will still be impressed.)
- Even if you think they look gaudy, buy one of those stars that all the shops are selling. Don't worry; it will look beautiful when it's lit up on your house or in the palm tree in your front yard.
- Don't even bother trying to wrap your Christmas sari yourself. Just run down the hall half-naked and someone is sure to take you behind a closed door to help you out with all that material.
- Finally, stop by your favorite bakery as often as possible. You can't celebrate Christmas without gaining a few pounds, can you?

## What I Miss Most...

Well, Christmas is approaching. By now, you know me well enough to know that I am not missing the prospect of having a white Christmas complete with an unbearable chill in the air this year. No, the tropical Christmas suits me just fine. But what I miss most, with Christmas fast approaching, are Christmas cookies. Yes, that's right, my sweet tooth has not gone into hibernation this winter, and as the holiday gets closer and closer, my cravings get stronger and stronger. All I want is one little sugar cookie cut in the shape of a tree (or a star or a Santa head or even just a circle) and decorated in green (or blue or yellow or even just plain white) frosting. How I miss Christmas cookies.

## ...and What I Like Best

Although there isn't a Christmas cookie (as described above) to be found in all of Aluva (and probably all of India for that matter), my sweet tooth can usually be satisfied from the choice of sweets that can be found at the countless bakeries that line the streets of the city. From candies (made of pure fat and what could be better?) to cookies (not like we have at home, but cookies just the same) to the irresistible frosted slices of cake (and I mean irresistible), there is plenty here to satisfy my need for sugar. This month, as I'm missing my normal Christmastime indulgences, what I like best is the feeling I get when I walk into a bakery to see all of those yummy things just waiting to be eaten by a girl with an incurable sweet tooth. I try not to spoil myself too often (simple living, remember?), but how can I resist those sweet little things when they are screaming my name from behind the glass?

## For More Information...

I have come to India via the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program. There are currently 37 volunteers serving with YAGM in eight different countries. To learn more about the amazing things that YAGM does, please visit their web site at: [www.elca.org/globalserve/youngadults](http://www.elca.org/globalserve/youngadults)

The ELCA's YAGM program is a partnership with the Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) program of the Presbyterian Church (USA). These two programs work together to make this year of service the best it could possibly be for the volunteers. To learn more about the YAV program of PC (USA), please visit the web site at: <http://pcusa.org/msr/youngadult>

If you would like more information on what I am doing here in India from day to day, please read my blog: <http://ckerickson.blogspot.com>

You can also view some of my pictures at <http://ckerickson.myphotoalbum.com>

If you would like to contact me (and I certainly welcome this), you can do so by email: [chester110105@yahoo.com](mailto:chester110105@yahoo.com)

If you do not have access to email, you can reach me by post at: Charlotte Erickson; The Union Christian College; Aluva - 683102; Kerala, India

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

~Luke 2:7