

MERRY CHRISTMAS

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Today it is snowing in Seattle, all four kiddos are off at school, the tree is just up, and a highly eclectic playlist of Christmas music is warming the empty house. I don't think a better letter writing opportunity will come this year, so I've forced myself to stop and write to you all about the last year. Sadly, the last two annual letters I've written have never made it off my hard drive to you all. I'll have Andrew upload them to our website (see above), so you can read them and catch up on all the kids' goofy stories.

As for the grown-ups, you've caught me in a sentimental moment. Andrew and I are now working on our 19th year of marriage, and that first Christmas tree hunt that I wrote about in my first Christmas letter is still a vibrant, warm memory. The way he, with just a couple years under his belt in the States, was shocked by the strong, strange smell of a Christmas tree in the house. The feeble saw we dug out of our tiny starter toolbox to hack away at the low branches that prevented the tree from fitting in the stand. The stand, with bolts that didn't fit the holes made for them, had to be returned to the drug store where we should have known not to buy a tree stand in the first place. The way he was amazed at what I could do with that tree and how it warmed our little apartment. Things have changed a lot. There are a lot more opinions about which tree to buy. We've invested in the industrial-strength stand, and our 14-year-old is now able to take my place as dad's assistant in tying the tree to the roof rack. Still stress and joy. Grumbling and beauty. But as I watch our kids grow so fast, I know it's the biggest cliché there is, but it is true that their childhood is a blink looking back. Matthew just stepped off the kindergarten bus yesterday and now he's talking about college. A lump swells in my throat knowing my time with him is short and the younger ones' childhoods will move no slower. There is comfort, though, in remembering that first Christmas. Knowing how much Andrew and I can enjoy just being together. Our Christmas rituals now, and for many



years to come still, have many more players than that first one, each with their own personality and each of those personalities has a relationship with every other. The dynamic is dizzying if you try to control it, but we have 4 kids and a young golden retriever. No one expects us to have it all under control! This is a very good reason to have 4 kids by the way. This year, it all started with deciding where to buy the tree. Matt, 14, wants to get it over with and picks the roadside stand, while the younger three still want the tree farm with its hot chocolate, Santa, and ornament shop. Matt realizes Grace, 5, is the weak link and that he can potentially manufacture a tie vote by swinging her his way. His parents are privy to this manipulation however, and while he succeeds we go to the tree farm anyway.

When we arrive, Zach must have a hot chocolate immediately, while Matt must complete the task at hand. This time Matt wins. The first tree we lay eyes on is the best and yet we walk away, like we do EVERY YEAR, only to see another family walk up immediately and look interested. Oops! Also, trees are not marked with a height this year, and the tree will be in our room with the lowest ceiling. Andrew and I go back and forth trying to decide how much taller each tree is than we are. We are clearly terrible at this by the way, as evidenced by our topperless tree that has already had 6 inches cut off and still nearly

“The message of Christmas is not that we can make peace. Or that we can make love, make light, make gifts, or make this world save itself. The message of Christmas is that this world's a mess and we can never save ourselves from ourselves and we need a Messiah.
For unto us a child is born.”

The Greatest Gift, Ann Voskamp



touches the ceiling. Oops! Fortunately, the family considering our first tree after us, which we have now realized is indeed perfect, is also foolish enough to walk away and continue hunting. We swoop in and grab it. Zach, 9, and Matt agree, this is the one. Isaiah, 11, likes the other contender. As our truest middle child he feels his opinion has been overlooked once again. I offer him veto power for next year's tree hunt as a consolation and he smiles. But will I remember? Grace, whatever her opinion initially, is easily swayed once again and Zach finally gets his hot chocolate. A quick pic with a loose-bearded Santa for Grace, and a run through the ornament store, and we are off. Matt helps Andrew get the tree on the roof, a rite of passage for a young man.

Decorating takes place later. Andrew gets the tree in the stand. I put up the lights late that night according to my dad's carefully-honed methods. Grace is her mother's daughter and loves this Christmas stuff. She comes to me during her least favorite hours of the week, the Seahawks game, when she can't get anyone's attention to save her life and whispers in my ear, "Mom, you know I love to work, and there is lots of work to be done to set up Christmas." I open the appropriate boxes and she decorates the bottom two thirds of the tree all by herself. She then moves on to the stockings and Nativity set. Seriously, it is bordering on actually being helpful

already. She's going to put me out of a job.

The next day we finish up. Isaiah really enjoys the process of hanging his ornaments and the walk down memory lane that they already represent. He is my sentimental one. His involvement is short lived, but I love seeing his pleasure in the process. Zach also jumps in and even starts singing along with the Christmas music, when he's not telling our family robot, Alexa, to play pop songs instead. He loves the reaction he gets (moaning, sighing and threats on his life) when he plays "Me Too" by Meghan Trainor. Matt confesses a preference for his dad's Christmas playlist over mine, which gives me a good chuckle as he mercilessly teases his father for only liking "dead people music." He has even subdivided his father's dead people music into 3 genres: light dad, medium dad and heavy dad. Matt's observations here are not entirely off



base. Grace sings along to just about anything, but with a dramatic flare. All that emotion in her facial expressions! It's like musical theater, even if she doesn't know the words.

And Andrew, well he watches mostly. I think he is still a little overwhelmed by the madness. After all they had what they considered a big tree back in Bombay, and it was about 3 feet tall, with plastic branches that they installed upside down until my Christmas with them. This was the one piece of wisdom this Pacific Northwest girl was able to provide to her highly educated in-laws back in the day.

So here we sit. All decorated up, driving Matt nuts with Christmas music, spending way too much time talking about Christmas wish lists, and struggling to keep the meaning of the season, God's love come down in the form of a little baby Jesus, in the center of it all. This is our family and we love each other, even if we do sometimes punch each other in the nose — don't worry, only the boys, and maybe occasionally Grace ;-). Thank God that we are forgiven, and loved unconditionally, not by each other, though we try, but by the God of the universe. What could be better than that! Merry Christmas everyone! From our zoo to yours!

Lots of Love,

The Davids

3 years of Top Kid Quotes

Grace asked Matt to help her put on her sweater. Matt said "You can do it yourself. I believe in you." Grace replies, "That is not good. You should believe in God!"

Grace has created a new word that I think I like: "ickscusting," as in "that insect is sooo... ickscusting." So many great uses!

Grace to Zach, describing her preschool classroom "... and there are turkeys on everything, because, you know, it is almost Valentines day." Hmm...

As a part of toddler-triggered bedtime conversations about death and heaven I said, "In heaven, the streets will be paved with gold!" Gracie replied after a gasp of excitement, "Ooooh! I am going to bring my tap shoes!!!"

"Mommy, you smell good! (Showing me our skin colors next to each other) I'm chocolate and you're peach. Don't I smell good mommy?"

Zachary sniffed Grace's stuffed bunny this morning and she is insisting that he has completely ruined it. "Your breaf went right froo her and now she stinks. Will you please wash her mommy?"