As a kid, one of my favorite things to do on a winter evening when everyone else was occupied was to make the living room completely dark (except for the lights on the tree), put on a stack of Christmas records, and just sit there absorbing the atmosphere. I'd squint my eyes half-shut and the tree lights would turn into hundreds of tiny star bursts. In the peace of those moments, the pictures in the Christmas carols would come alive in my mind; the world was a magical place, and anything was possible. Then, inevitably, someone would walk into the living room, flip on a light to do something sensible, and end my little Christmas reverie.

Turning off the lights and squinting my eyes had the added benefit of hiding any imperfections that the current Christmas tree might have. Most years my dad would take a couple of us kids out to the pasture and cut down a tree. One year when the pickings were especially slim, he cut two wimpy looking trees. Each of them was full on one side and sparse on the other. So – he tied them together to make one full-size tree. That may have been the low point of my family's Christmas tree experiences. My parents tell me about the first time they went to a Christmas tree farm and cut a "perfect" tree: when they set it in its stand, I took one look at it and cried because it "wasn't a real tree." I have no memory of that. The trees that I do remember were beautifully shaped; it was probably after the transition to "bought" Christmas trees that I took on the novel responsibility of stringing the lights and doing the bulk of the decorating.

Maybe they should have stuck to cow pasture trees after all. I married a man whose tree-cutting methods are very similar to my father's. When our children were little, Roger drove us up to the strip mine and dragged us around until we found something that could pass for a beautiful holiday decoration. And he took the homemade look one step further. Instead of wasting money on a handy-dandy (and well-designed) Christmas tree stand, he filled a five-gallon bucket with damp sand and stuck our Christmas tree into that for the season. Have you ever tried putting a tree skirt over a sandy five-gallon bucket? It doesn't quite conform to the picturesque holiday scene that my mind insists on creating. The tree skirt was too small to do the job, so we compromised with a bed sheet. But the kids didn't complain – with a tree stand that tall, there was plenty of room for presents underneath!

This is the kind of battle that a quiet but determined wife can always win. After several years of that frugal nonsense, I found a nice, artificial, pre-lit tree at half price and packed it away in the attic. Now I don't even have to mess with Christmas decorating anymore. My boys can pull out the tree and assemble it. The kids decorate it together, and all I have to do is make popcorn and hot chocolate, then help clean up the mess. As a bonus, this tree came with its own stand, so Roger's five-gallon buckets are all freed up.
Sometimes I wonder why we make such a huge deal out of the Christmas season. People talk about having "the Christmas spirit" and tell you to remember "the reason for the season." So every December, I spend too much money on gifts, eat too much rich food, and wear myself out with too many activities and not enough sleep. Usually by the middle of the month, I'm longing for January first, when everything is over with and I can just spend some peaceful time with my family. About every other year I become a complete Scrooge and threaten insane things like running away to a cheap hotel with my computer and a stack of books from December 15th 'til New Year’s. Every year, the craziness of Christmas activities drives me to the question, "What's the point of all this commotion?!" I still don't completely understand.

One night in Bethlehem, a mysterious and beautiful thing happened. A little baby entered the world, surrounded by dirt, nature and some pretty exciting visitors. In honor of that precious moment, I (two thousand years later) stress out over creating perfect holiday memories for my children and buying the four of them equal amounts of gifts so no one feels slighted. Oh, the beauty of Christmas.

At our church we set up an outdoor nativity scene each year. It's big enough and bright enough that cars driving by on the other side of the creek can glance over and see Mary and Joseph in the cold night air, smiling down on their almost naked infant in a hay-filled manger. Except, in our case, Mary and Joseph are smiling vacantly down at the legs of the disproportionately large manger as their baby freezes somewhere above their noses. When my son Judah was 3, he was fascinated by the figures. I don't know how many times we went out there and walked around it, Judah touching each person and telling me who they were. For a while whenever we were at church he kept begging me, "Mom, let's go see Jesus again!" His excited request was a refocusing reminder for me, and I've thought of it many times since. I have a hard time seeing past the gaudiness, the glitz and clamor of Christmas in America. Lighted plastic nativity lawn figures are, to me, the epitome of bad Christmas decor. But Judah was just delighted to be there, meandering happily around the Holy Family. His words, his sweet sincerity, were a clear reminder to me that my mission as a mother is to live in such a way that my children will learn to look beyond the surface tension of Christianity and fall in love with Jesus, finding His presence in the everyday.

My pastor friend Tommy Miller likes to tell his congregation, "Christmas shouldn't just be once a year; it should be every day. We should celebrate Christmas all year long." While the thought of "Joy to the World" and shiny red and green decorations 365 days a year makes me feel nauseous, I agree with the sentiment of the statement. If I'm modeling my life after Christ, then I should be living every day of my life with a spirit of giving. My daily attitude should be one of "peace on earth, goodwill to men." If I'm not careful, all the effort that I put into creating Christmas (even the good things) can overshadow and trivialize the power of God in a manger. When the tree is packed away again in the attic, and even after the first daffodils start poking up around a forgotten Rudolph down the road, I hope that my children will still see me finding joy in the everyday, constantly conscious of the Gift that we celebrate at Christmas.