

Kathmandu Christmas

“In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD...’” --Isaiah 2:2, 3a.

The evening sun blazes the Himalayan peaks pink just before descending for the night. Christmas eve interrupts little in the Kathmandu Valley, but our senses are heightened by our anticipation.

Earlier...Walking to the bus stop on the Bhaktapur Road, we marvel at the snow-covered mountains rimming the valley, shooting up above the haze of the city. The brown rice paddies, newly seeded, contrast with the gray and tan homes – wedding cake architecture, Thandiwe calls it, with its numerous multi-leveled balconies. Some children play a lively game of soccer.

We are headed to Pashtupathina, the Hindu complex and public cremation site on the banks of the Bagmati. We board an already crowded bus, but, as has happened each time in crowded buses and vans, Ana is offered a seat – benefits of gray hair in a society that seemingly respects the elderly. We disembark near the expansive complex of temples and other buildings. A statue of Buddha stands on the river bank, a mystery. Mother Theresa's Sisters of Mercy run a hospice for the dying, for those whose feet, just before death, will be dipped in the river and whose bodies, just after death, will be wrapped in bright orange cloths, covered with blossoms, laid atop pyres of wood, burned to ashes to be finally strewn in the holy waters of the river. Just above on the river, we see a Buddhist monastery. Religions living side-by-side. Hope in this dark world.

Numerous colourful stalls line the broad walk within the Hindu complex. Hundreds of strands of yellow and orange flowers. Bowls brimming with individual blossoms. Candles in clay holders – we purchase 10 for our Christmas Festival. Lights in the darkness on a winter's eve.

On the way home, we ply through crowded city streets, seeking specialty shops and stalls selling items for our Christmas Festival: red and silver paper in a stationary shop; velvety red ribbon in a notions shop; boxes of chocolate in a candy shop. Tangerines, apples, bananas and musk melon from a favourite fruit stall. Beer and rum from a corner grocer. Our backpacks full, we return to Balkot and the Pitzer Program House where Thandiwe lives and works.

Thandiwe has invited her colleagues and friends for a Christmas Festival. Christmas Eve has been chosen, as Christmas Day is not a holiday, and many work. Now in anticipation, we cut out crowns, set out candles, and hang streamers from the woven mat ceiling.

What makes a gathering a festival in Kathmandu, Nepal? Let's see...goat meat, beer and rum. And tonight popcorn. We start with popcorn. As people arrive, we crowd into the kitchen where Ratnaji, the Program House cook, serves up popcorn. The cement floor is cold through our stockinged feet; our shoes remain two flights below, just inside the exterior door.

What about some Christmas carols? We three--Thandiwe, Tod and Ana--sing one after the other, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” “The First Noel,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Out comes our travel-size Advent calendar, its artwork a picture of Bethlehem.

The story unfolds...Bethlehem...the town where Jesus was born, like Lumbini, the town nearby where Buddha was born. So the stories go. Only a few windows on the calendar have been opened, as we have been traveling, so Buwon opens number 1... a cow. Ratnaji opens number 2... a Christmas tree. Bhemji opens number 6... a star. Each symbol of the season needs an explanation...traditions from the dark winters of Europe, evergreens ever-alive, a cow like a yak common in the homes. Christmas carol verses arise from the images, “O Christmas Tree,” “Jingle Bells,” “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” When Lokuma opens number 22 revealing a crown, we burst into “We Three Kings.” The paper crowns appear. The red and silver paper shines above the beaming faces. Gifts are distributed: pens and chocolates.

We move into the dining room and invite each person to light one of the Christmas candles from the Hindu stall. The flames stretch, filling the room with dancing shadows. The goat meat is served. Everyone savours their 2 bite-size pieces...spiced as a curry. Delicious. Then the regular meal, dahl-bath (lentils and rice) and greens. We sit crossed-legged on the cushions that line the walls, our plates sitting on the mat floor. Hands scoop up the sumptuous meal. A Christmas feast.

“Tell the story,” Ratnaji requests eagerly. “Tell the story of Christmas.” Buwon, too, wants to hear. Everyone turns to Tod who begins, “Once there was a king named Caesar...” Thandiwe translates. The Bible remains closed, and the story, told around the flickering flames of the Hindu candles, comes alive. Tax collectors, long journeys, pregnancy, crowded towns—Nepalis understand that concept for sure, wicked kings, poor shepherds, angels.

Light flickers on the attentive faces -- 4 Christians and 7 Hindus – hearing the Christmas story. Emmanuel! God with us! Religions living side-by-side celebrating the many ways God is made manifest. Hope in this dark world.

Love is in this place. God is love. God is in this place.

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what [they have] done has been done through God. - John 3:21 NIV

Ana and Tod Gobledale visited their daughter, Thandiwe, in Nepal before returning to the USA in January. They have completed their work in Australia and are open to a ministry call in North America. You may contact them at: 1545 Tacoma Beach Road, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin 54235, gobledales@hotmail.com