Jesus, Christmas and Tarahumaras

Christmas is upon us and once again we will be encouraged by cards and homilies to “remember the real meaning of Christmas.” Perhaps we have heard it so many times that we have become numbed to the reminder. But we indeed must remember what Christmas actually is – nothing less than a celebration of the incarnation of God. “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man.”

Missions to tribal peoples such as the Tarahumara are often called “cross cultural” because a missionary has to cross over cultural and language barriers in order to communicate the Gospel. So what does Christmas have to do with cross cultural missions? Simply that Jesus is the quintessential cross cultural missionary. Think about it...God the Father could have written the Gospel in the sky for all to see; He could have dropped tracts from above for all to read, or audibly broadcast it for all to hear. But instead He sent His Son in the form of a man. As the ancient creed says, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only son, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born to the Virgin Mary....”

It doesn’t seem to be a very efficient way to do things, but God says, “my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways”

To put it succinctly, God is not opposed to mass media, or radio, or TV evangelists; but His heart is especially focused on incarnational missions - “boots on the ground” – one person at a time, healing, teaching, preaching and praying, just like Jesus. And like Jesus, adapting oneself to the language and culture of a people (although Jesus had to make a much greater cultural jump that any of us have had to do.)

“The most effective witness the church makes will always be in the lives of those who in Christ’s name bury themselves in the lives and struggles of another people, missionaries who serve the people, learn to speak their language, develop the capacity to feel their hurt and hunger, and who learn to love them personally and individually.” - M. Theron Rankin

All of us here at Mexico Medical Missions have left comfortable, secure homes to work with the Tarahumara, but Jesus left heaven itself. And Jesus made a terrible sacrifice for our sins, so that we wouldn’t have to.

So this Christmas, please remember what Jesus did to show his love to a desperately needy world.

“This Christmas we are asking you to strengthen your partnership with us. You may choose to make a one-time donation to our general fund or you may specify your gift to a particular project. You may also choose to make a monthly commitment. Thank you for standing with us.”

“Wise men still worship Him”

Wise men still worship Him

To put it succinctly, God is not opposed to mass media, or radio, or TV evangelists; but His heart is especially focused on incarnational missions - “boots on the ground” – one person at a time, healing, teaching, preaching and praying, just like Jesus. And like Jesus, adapting oneself to the language and culture of a people (although Jesus had to make a much greater cultural jump that any of us have had to do.)

“The most effective witness the church makes will always be in the lives of those who in Christ’s name bury themselves in the lives and struggles of another people, missionaries who serve the people, learn to speak their language, develop the capacity to feel their hurt and hunger, and who learn to love them personally and individually.” - M. Theron Rankin

All of us here at Mexico Medical Missions have left comfortable, secure homes to work with the Tarahumara, but Jesus left heaven itself. And Jesus made a terrible sacrifice for our sins, so that we wouldn’t have to.

So this Christmas, please remember what Jesus did to show his love to a desperately needy world.

“This Christmas we are asking you to strengthen your partnership with us. You may choose to make a one-time donation to our general fund or you may specify your gift to a particular project. You may also choose to make a monthly commitment. Thank you for standing with us.”

“Wise men still worship Him”

To put it succinctly, God is not opposed to mass media, or radio, or TV evangelists; but His heart is especially focused on incarnational missions - “boots on the ground” – one person at a time, healing, teaching, preaching and praying, just like Jesus. And like Jesus, adapting oneself to the language and culture of a people (although Jesus had to make a much greater cultural jump that any of us have had to do.)

“The most effective witness the church makes will always be in the lives of those who in Christ’s name bury themselves in the lives and struggles of another people, missionaries who serve the people, learn to speak their language, develop the capacity to feel their hurt and hunger, and who learn to love them personally and individually.” - M. Theron Rankin

All of us here at Mexico Medical Missions have left comfortable, secure homes to work with the Tarahumara, but Jesus left heaven itself. And Jesus made a terrible sacrifice for our sins, so that we wouldn’t have to.

So this Christmas, please remember what Jesus did to show his love to a desperately needy world.

“This Christmas we are asking you to strengthen your partnership with us. You may choose to make a one-time donation to our general fund or you may specify your gift to a particular project. You may also choose to make a monthly commitment. Thank you for standing with us.”

“Wise men still worship Him”
I love eye surgery outreaches. They are the ultimate in “instant gratification”; the patients are literally led in blind and walk out seeing the next day. Even Jesus would have a hard time healing someone quicker (just kidding!) I am also surprised by the lack of emotion or visible joy that we see when the eye patches are removed and a formerly blind person can now see. It’s hard to get a smile out of a Tarahuma, but when we do get a smile it makes all the hard work worth it.

Such a patient was Francisco who was a totally blind Tarahumara man born with deformities in his eyes. He had adequate vision as a young man to run the 100 mile races for which the Tarahumara are famous, but with age he continued to lose his vision until he could see nothing.

Because of the congenital deformity of the eye, Dr. Dave knew that this was going to be a difficult cataract surgery. Treating the advanced, hard cataracts of these people is never easy, but this case was going to be really hard with no possibility of a second chance. We put Francisco in a bed for four days while Dr. Dave ruminated and prayed over this case. Dr. Dave takes his calling as an eye surgeon seriously and reverently. I recall an old saying: “Courage is fear having said its prayers” and Dr. Dave summoned his courage and did the surgery.

Because of the nature of the deformity, he had to resort to “old technology” in that he didn’t put a new lens in the eye. The next day the eye appeared to be healing, but without a lens, Francisco’s vision was extremely blurred. It reminded me of when Jesus healed a blind man who then said, “I see people, but they look like trees walking.” In the Bible story Jesus then laid his hands on the man’s eyes, but here we had to find him some old fashioned “Coke bottle” cataract glasses. When he put them on, I witnessed a smile like I have rarely seen in a Tarahumara.

I have known missionaries that left the Sierra Madre because they felt that they just weren’t shown enough gratitude for all the hard work that they had done for the Tarahumara people. It’s true; we don’t hear “Nateralara” very often. (“Thank You” in the Tarahumara language). But I am reminded of the old Puritan saying, “We perform for an audience of One.” In other words, if we want to hear “Well done” then let’s strive to hear it from Jesus and not from men. Everyone at Mexico Medical Missions knows that the only true and lasting accolades come from God.

Last December, Hospital Misión Tarahumara was closed for the first time in its fifteen year history due to the outbreak of deadly fighting between the competing drug cartels in the Sierra Madre. Unfortunately, our area is now known as the “Golden Triangle” of Mexico because of the extensive opium cultivation here. The Mexican Army and State Police are outgunned by the cartels and are unable to maintain lawful control over this area. We are essentially under the governance of the Sinaloa cartel whose leader, “Chapo” Guzman recently escaped from prison. Fortunately, 2015 has been relatively peaceful. There have been skirmishes between the cartels but no major outbreaks of violence.

Recently, Maci and I drove out of Samachique on our way to a meeting in Chihuahua. We had to pass by the cartel sentry outpost only 100 yards from the hospital. A group of young “sicarios,” wearing masks and armed with automatic weapons, waved goodbye at us as we passed. As we headed down the road, Maci remarked, “I would have paid money for that picture! That was really weird… It’s like they’re were trying to be our sons wishing us a good trip.” Unfortunately, this is the strange world in which we find ourselves.

Last year Hospital Misión Tarahumara became the de facto field hospital for the Sinaloa cartel during the fighting and we had to treat mercenaries with horrible gunshot wounds. Treating sicarios is dangerous and puts us at risk with Mexican authorities who could accuse us of colluding
with a criminal organization.

In an attempt to distance ourselves from the cartels, we posted a sign outside the hospital saying that we didn’t treat gunshot wounds and requesting that the wounded be taken to the nearest government hospital. We also requested that weapons not be brought into the hospital. But the cartel made it clear that they would ignore the sign.

I had to struggle with my own feelings of anger that our hospital, having been built with such love and devotion in order to serve the Tarahumara people, was being used by the cartels. But the sicarios know that we provide the best care in the region. I was resentful and offended that the beautiful Sierra Madre which I grew to love all through the 90’s had been converted into a battleground. We had hoped that the developing tourist industry would provide economic opportunities for the Tarahumara people, but there seems to be little hope for that right now.

By God’s grace I have arrived at a certain peace with the situation, and I have come to accept that living with the cartels is the price we pay to reach the Tarahumara. We trust that God is our Protector.

So please join us in praying for peace in the Sierra Madre.

---

**AN AWKWARD BIRTH**

As an orthopedic surgeon, I usually don’t have much to do with delivering babies, but late one night last summer I was the only doctor available at the hospital when a Tarahumara teenage girl showed up with her mother at the emergency room complaining of abdominal pain. Her mother was actually known to me since she had helped care for Maci’s mother during the last year of her life in Mexico. I looked at this girl’s distended belly and asked if she had had a pregnancy test. The mother assured me that she was not pregnant and that yes, she had had a negative test at a government clinic. Nevertheless, I thought that our midwife should have a look, just in case a pregnancy had somehow been missed.

So I awakened our midwife Lizzie on the radio and waited for her to arrive, and the girl asked to use the bathroom in the meantime. As Lizzie entered the hospital there was a sudden commotion; it became apparent that the teenager had delivered a baby into the toilet. Lizzie rushed into the bathroom and retrieved the baby who, by the grace of God, was doing fine; and the nurses escorted the new mother into the Birthing Center for further care.

A few months later grandma and her daughter knocked on our door wanting to show off a healthy baby boy to Maci.

This was certainly not the ideal way for a baby boy to come into the world...a scared teenage mother (not to mention a prospective grandmother in some strange denial), no prenatal care, and no skilled midwife to attend the birth (or at least not until after the delivery).

This Christmas we celebrate another birth in less than ideal circumstances. Mary knew what was happening, but that certainly didn’t assuage her fears of delivering her first born without a midwife. Joseph had been assured by God in a dream that Mary’s child had been conceived by the Holy Spirit, but he still must have been somewhat confused as to how and why all this had happened. And a manger is certainly not that much cleaner than a toilet as a place to deliver a child. We do know that Mary was attended by angels and I often compare our nurses and midwives to angels. But this holy birth was like none other in the history of mankind. So this Christmas let us sing the old carol:

_Mild He lays His glory by,_
_Born that man no more may die;_  
_Born to raise the sons of earth;_  
_Born to give them second birth._

_From “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” by Charles Wesley_
2015 was quite the year for Mexico Medical Missions’ Team

- 10,000 patient consults
- 300 surgeries
- 1,300 emergency room visits
- 240 hospitalizations and births
- 228 ambulance runs accounting for more than 25,000 miles in our ambulances and trucks
- 2 eye clinics (241 eye patients; 56 eye surgeries)
- Established plastic surgery program in cooperation with the University of Chihuahua
- Bi-weekly trips to remote villages by the CHE Team
- Purchase of property adjacent to the main campus for additional staff housing and vehicle shop
- Opening of demonstration farm by agricultural missionary Andrew Bornman
- Recognized by the Mexican government as the best managed non-profit in the state of Chihuahua
- “Day of Philanthropy” award recipient as one of the five most effective charities in the region.

With clinic patients, ambulance transports, airplane flights, and community medical outreaches, we have seen more patients in 2015 than ever before. Doctors Pedro, Paco, David and Felipe provided compassionate primary care while Doctors Mike and Chuck continued to provide general and orthopedic surgical care to a population that has no other access to health care.

Having anesthetist Eric Kramer on staff has allowed us to increase the number and complexity of surgeries we are able to do. We are on track to complete 300 surgeries by the end of this year.

Thanks to Doctors David and Teena Doka from El Paso, and Dr. Ralph Berkeley and Dr. Elvia Canseco from Houston, we were able to have two eye clinics this year that screened 241 patients and performed surgeries on 56 patients which literally gave sight to the blind.

Money was raised to complete the purchase of our Piper CarbonCub that we used to transport many of our critical patients as well as our missionaries to and from their work. We flew over 100 patients from remote communities to the hospital.

One of the biggest changes we have seen this year on our campus is the growing maturity and language skills of our young missionaries. For example, a Tarahumara man who was near death from a horrible infection was brought in by his wife. Despite several surgeries, he died late one night. Five of our young doctors, nurses and Community Health Evangelism workers stood vigil at his bedside, and after he died they comforted the wife and began praying with her in Tarahumara. We don’t know how God moved in her heart, but she certainly had a wonderful witness of Christian faith and love. We have a steadily growing ability to teach and preach in the Tarahumara language, and we can see faces become animated when they hear the Gospel in their own “heart” language.

This Christmas we are asking you to strengthen your partnership with us. You may choose to make a one-time donation to our general fund or you may specify your gift to a particular project. You may also choose to make a monthly commitment. Thank you for standing with us.