

## One Man's Journey ...

In *Over The Static*, Pastor Dion Garrett taps into the whirlwind of questions, emotions, and just plain busyness that surround the holidays for a young man named Jordan. Using the private format of journal writing to convey Jordan's personal thoughts and observations, Garrett deftly captures a transformation of sorts for his character in the 30 days between the day after Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve. Conversations between Jordan's sister Kate, his friend Jack, and a hoped-for girlfriend—Hope—inform his changing take on Christmas and what it really means. The real nexus is made, however, when Jordan gets it that God's solution to the human condition came in the form of a baby—the infant Jesus. Questions still remain for Jordan with Christmas a few hours away, but he is determined that his family and friends will help him “figure it out.”

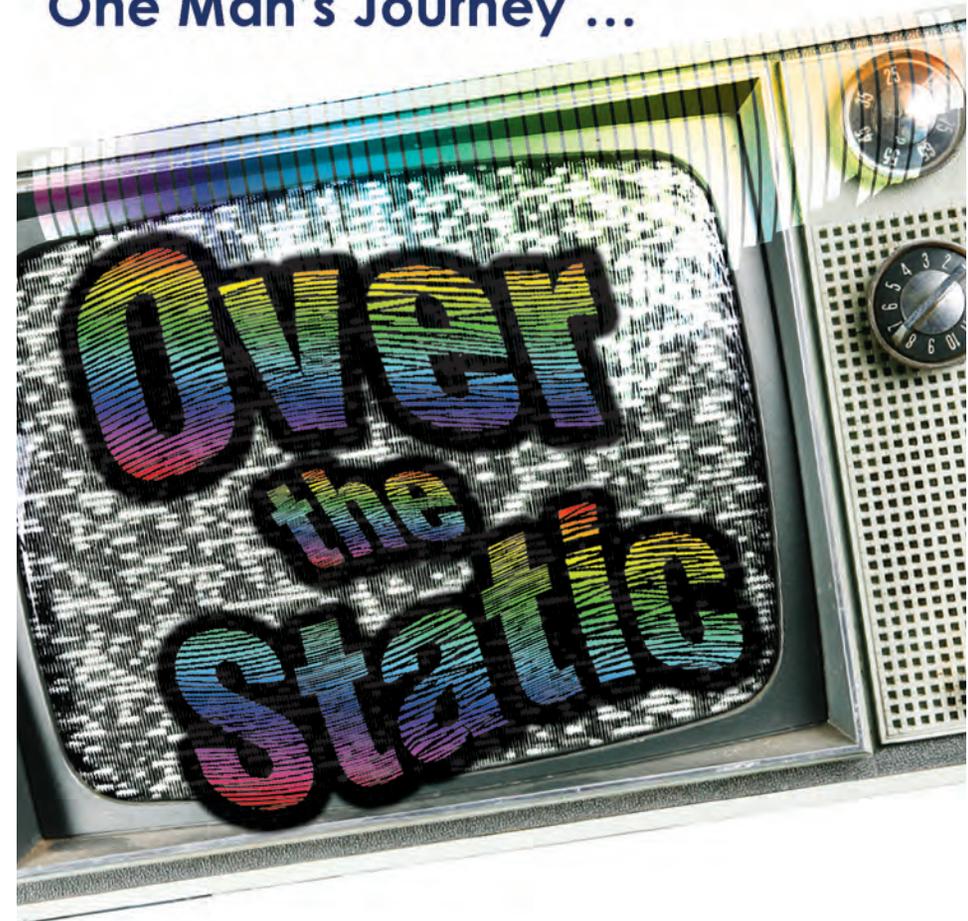
Dion Garrett is a teaching pastor at St. John, a dynamic and thriving Lutheran congregation in Ellisville, Missouri. Much of the creativity behind *Over The Static* stems from his keen awareness of how Christmas for many people is both confusing and misunderstood.



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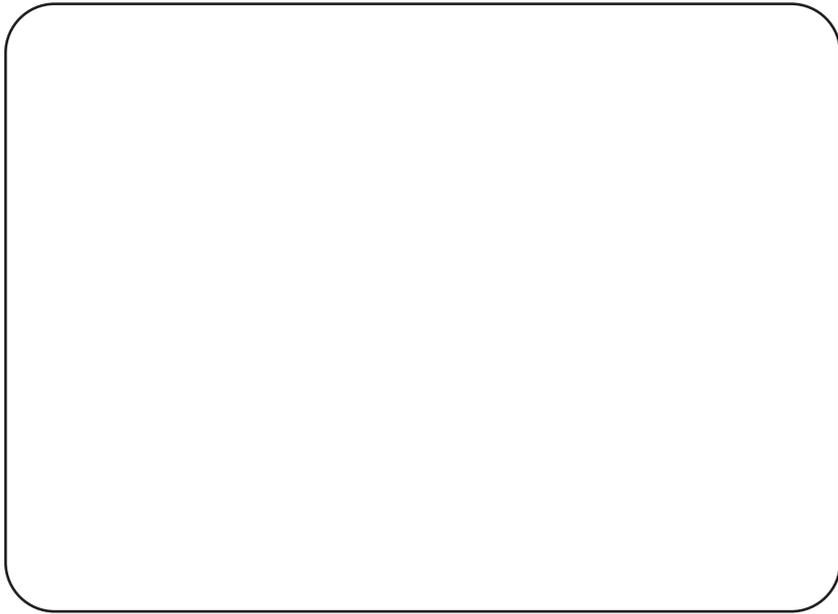
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**LUTHERAN HOUR MINISTRIES**  
*People Of Christ With The Message Of Hope*

## *Over the Static*

In *Over The Static*, Pastor Dion Garrett chronicles a few days in the life of a young man (Jordan) who is unfamiliar with church ritual or even what the word “Advent” means. Using a journal given to him by his sister, the man wrestles with the trappings of the holidays and the seemingly elusive meaning of what Christmas is all about. Through his relationships (sister, a brother-in-law, a friend, and a girl named Hope), the young man experiences the most important 30 days of his life. As this reflection follows the man’s thoughts, each day ends with pointed questions directed to the reader. Laying hold of the mystery and wonder of Christmas is no small thing, and this offering shows it often takes many people to tell the single story of God’s love as revealed in a baby born in a manger 2,000 years ago.



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## Introduction

Here goes a little experiment. Kate gave me this journal for my birthday. She said she thought it would be helpful to write down my thoughts. I guess it’s obvious to her that I’m in a fog. The empty stares and the blaring fog horns are probably a dead giveaway.

Ever since we were little kids she’s taken her big sister role very seriously. It used to be wiping my nose and helping me cross the street. Lately she’s taken on the cause of helping me figure out life, thus the journal. I considered using it to level my wobbly coffee table but...

I know I could benefit from some clarity on what this life of mine is all about. College was like being on auto-pilot. I like to say I was enrolled in the space program, I took up space! My first couple of years out in the “real world” were pretty much the same. I’m realizing that I can’t keep this up for the rest of my life. Life has to have a destination, right? And if not a destination, at least a general direction?

I’ve never played the part of the obedient little brother very well, but right now I’m thinking, “Why not?” Maybe Kate is right, maybe this will help. At the very least, it’ll be a good excuse to use a pen from time to time. In 100 years I wonder if humans will even remember how to write anymore. The computer ... the beginning of our de-evolution.

So here’s to sorting out my direction in life—and not having to lie to my sister when she asks how the journal is working out!

Friday November 26

Not a good day. I understand now why they call today “Black Friday.” I waited in line all night to get a shot at a “doorbuster” special on a Blu-ray player. I had it all mapped out on where I was pretty sure they would be. Sure enough, I was right. At least my second guess was. I’ve never seen so many stuff-crazed people. I ended up having to wrestle one away from a very angry lady who may have at one time been a professional wrestler. After getting a safe distance away (and checking to see if my nose was bleeding), I took a closer look at the box. Quanaxx? Who in the world has ever heard of a Quanaxx Blu-ray player? Suddenly the “unbelievable deal” made sense to me. I dropped the thing in the aisle and left the store in disgust. I waited in line all night and wrestled Hulk Hogan’s twin sister for THIS?

I wonder why I do this each year? It all seems so exciting in the lead up to it, but now, only a few hours into the season, I’m ready to hibernate until spring. Why don’t humans get to hibernate anyway? It’d sure make things easier.

Huh, that’s weird. I just got a text from Kate. She’s been getting pretty over the top with all of these inspirational quotes lately; gotta love sisters! Crazy thing is, this one is dead on.

“Forget about what’s happened; don’t keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I’m about to do something brand new. It’s bursting out! Don’t you see it? There it is!” (footnote: Isaiah 43:18-19).

I don’t know exactly what this is supposed to mean but after my last day, I definitely like the sound of it. We’ll see...

Q: What part of Christmas wears you out? What would you love to see change this Christmas? Write it in the space below. Do you believe it could change?

Monday November 29

It's so cool what sleep can do for you. I tried out the hibernation thing (at least a small scale version of it) over the weekend. I'm amped about life again, AND I watched my favorite movie, *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. Yeah yeah I know a lot of people prefer the fuzzy feeling of *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, but it's all Chevy Chase in my world.

Here's a dude who has a dream for how he sees Christmas. He's all family, all holiday spirit, all good intentions, but then nothing goes right. His failures are all over the top, but at the same time he's so relatable. My favorite part is that even though everything ends up in disaster, there's still a sort of "happy ending." It tells me that there can still be the so-called "happy ending" even when life is a total disaster. Hey, my life is a disaster 98% of the time and it's cool to believe there could still be some kind of "happy ending."

Problem is, I don't have a picture of what the perfect Christmas would be like, let alone the perfect life. Does that make me a freak? I know how I want it to feel, but I don't know what it would take to get me there. Does anyone know, or are they just as clueless as me? All right this is too deep for a Monday.

And that text from Kate yesterday? I keep thinking about it. That whole part about "Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand new. It's bursting out! (footnote: Isaiah 43:19).

I don't even get it, right, except it's something from the Bible. Maybe it's God speaking? I keep wondering, could this whole thing be different this year? Not that I even know what "different" is?

Here's a good omen. There's a new girl at work today and she's really HOT. Makes work worth getting up and going to! If she sticks around the year just might get better!

Q: What would the perfect Christmas look like for you? Do you think it could ever happen?

### Day 3

Tuesday November 30

It's definitely "beginning to look a lot like Christmas!" No parking spaces, empty shelves, rude people, and a list of people to buy for that DON'T NEED ANYTHING! Most recently, I've noticed the charity bell-ringers out everywhere. How do they do it? After hearing 30 seconds of that bell on my way into the store the other day, I was ready to rip my own ears off the side of my head and bury them. Still, I gotta give 'em kudos for what they do. Hey, maybe they intentionally recruit people who are hard of hearing?

Since I've been in this "deep-thoughts" mood lately, I got to thinking about the name behind all of those bell ringers with their kettles full of loose change and crumpled up \$1s. The Salvation Army. I don't know what they mean by it, but I used to hate the name. Hearing a religious word tied with a military one reminds me of all the things wrong with religion: crusades, holy wars, inquisitions, all kinds of horrible stuff happens when those two words come together.

So, for whatever reason the name hit me differently today. If there really was an army of people who were dedicated to bringing in "salvation," I'd like to think they would be all about helping people. Too many people seem to think that yelling at people or just telling them to go to church is the way to make the world a better place, but it doesn't make sense to me. What did those things ever do to help anyone? If there were really such a thing as a "salvation army" I'd like to think that they would be more about caring for people in need and loving and serving them. I'm not sure what all the rest of those people are trying to save the world from, but poverty, war, and injustice seem to be the biggest issues I see. A "salvation army" should be about trying to fix those things.

Somehow I don't think the guy with the bell that I passed today thinks like this, maybe no one else does. Just a thought (laughing).

Oh yeah, THIS JUST IN, hot girl's name is ... get this ... Hope. Seriously?

Q: What does "salvation" mean to you? As you think about the needs of the human condition, what would rescue look like?

I know now what's been going on with me. I can connect the dots of my last month of experiences and see it now. I've been trying to figure out MY life when I think God is offering me NEW life. It's something completely different, brand new; it's breaking out, and now I see it. It all starts with this baby in a manger. He got through to me tonight. I glanced over at Hope and I could see her gently nodding. I get why she's so different ... new life starts with a baby.

When the service was over, Hope look at me hopefully. I think she saw that I was stirred up inside. She gave me a hug on the sidewalk, said "Merry Christmas," and reminded me that those who seek will find.

But there's still so much I don't understand. There's so much I'm not sure about, and I don't know how to move past it anyway. I still don't get how to accept God's forgiveness; I especially can't figure out what it must mean to have a relationship with someone I can't see, touch, or hear. I'm convinced that I'm not going to let all that stop me though.

This has been the most incredible Christmas ever. I never would've guessed that things could change so much in a month, but they have. Everything has changed. Something "new" really did break out. I'm excited about whatever comes next and I'm so thankful to have people like Hope, Kate, & Rob to help me figure it out. Oh, and Jack is NOT off the hook either. He's gotta get hold of this too.

Q: Have you received the new life of Jesus? Who do you have in your life to support your ongoing journey?

Friday December 24

Merry Christmas! It's late and I'm exhausted from all the activity today but I just had to write this all down while it's still fresh.

The highlight of my evening was church with Hope. The plan was to meet her at her church because we both had to go see family afterward. I was so nervous but I was trying my best to act cool. I didn't want to botch my "date" with Hope, but there was this greater sense of something big that was impending.

I met Hope in the lobby. She looked more beautiful than ever. Her whole appearance seemed to carry a supernatural glow. She was fully feeding off the joy of the day. She led me into the actual place where the service happened and we scouted a seat half way up. We made small talk until the service began.

The music was incredible. It was so high energy and full of spirit. I'm not much of a singer and I felt a little awkward sitting next to Hope, especially because she has a beautiful voice (of course, just add it to the list!) but I sang a little anyway.

Then it came time for the message. I had all of these images about what the pastor and the message would be like, albeit they were mostly from TV. I was pleasantly surprised at how natural-speaking and warm he was. I definitely didn't belong there like so many others did, but I still felt really welcomed.

He started talking about all the human solutions to human problems. At first I didn't understand where he was going with all of it, it was kind of depressing. But then he talked about how God had the perfect "solution" and that it wasn't a cavalry or a crusade or a government office or a bailout, but it was a baby. He talked about how ironic it is that a baby could deal with all these really horrific things in the world and in humanity, but he made his point by saying that this baby ... and the man he would grow to be ... would capture the hearts of people and change them from the inside out. He said that's the only kind of change that works and lasts.

Then it felt like he was speaking just to me. He said that a lot of us play around with trying to change a little "here and there" and that many of us try to improve ourselves by our own power. That described my last month to a "T." Then he said, "What you really need is to take hold of a new, changed life like only God can give ... and all new life begins with a baby."

Wednesday December 1

I honestly don't know why I keep Jack as one of my friends. Ok, actually, I do, he's a good-hearted guy and he's loyal. But he can be such a jerk sometimes. I know I sound negative at times too but Jack blows even me out of the water!

First he started by crushing my hopes about Hope. He said she's way out of my league and that I'm dreaming if I think any differently. Let the record show that I totally DISagree with him, but even if it's true, why does he have to dog me like that. What's wrong with a little hope—not HER but you know - *it*?

I even said as much to Jack. I'm feeling like there's lesson I'm supposed to be learning about hope right now or something. That's when he started in on the next part. He told me to be careful about reading too much into things. He says it's all a bunch of wishful thinking that will only mess with my head. And HE'S not?

Part of it is Jack's upbringing. As far as I can tell he was raised in a very religious family. As soon as he was old enough he ran the other way as fast as he could. He doesn't have a good relationship with anyone in his family, which is maybe why we've been such good friends; I'm probably the closest thing to family that he's got. Still, I don't think his upbringing qualifies him as any kind of expert. Besides, is it really any better to live expecting the worst? If Jack could change so much from the way he was raised, then isn't it reasonable that change can happen for the good? Is it wrong to assume that things could change for the better? Even if it's all just wishful thinking, sometimes it feels better to be wishful than hopeless.

But then again, maybe he's right, maybe there's no reason to hope for anything better? For today though, I feel like taking my chances.

Q: How have you seen spirituality change people, for good? For bad?

Thursday December 2

Hot chick, a.k.a. Hope, is a Christian ... oh boy, this is getting interesting. We were talking at work the other day, just she, Jack and I. Jack started making some sarcastic comment about that local “preacher” who got accused of skimming a portion of the Christmas donations that were supposed to be for needy kids. Imagine that, Jack being sarcastic about something ... oh wait, guess I’m not much better. Anyway, Hope chimed in about how you can’t judge a worldview by its abuses. I was blown away, not only is she gorgeous, but she’s smart too? Jack was stumped for a minute, then he fired back that if abuse is ALL you see, then maybe it’s not a very compelling worldview. I didn’t say a word. I was enjoying my great front row seat to this sparring match.

Hope called Jack out on using the word “All.” She said it was needless hyperbole (I still need to look that one up). She said that surely there were people who embodied their worldview well. Then she went on to say this ... I hope I got this right because it was so thought-provoking to me ... she said, “You should only judge a worldview on the basis of the life of its founder.”

That’s when she dropped the news that she is a Christian. She said that the reason she is a Christian is because of the life that Jesus lived, not because of the life of any Christ-follower.

Now maybe everyone knows that, but honestly, I’ve never thought about it that way. I’m not sure Jack had either. So much of his baggage is about people who go to church; it has never been much about the “founder” as Hope said.

The thing that is most interesting to me is that though maybe there is truth to what Hope said, about focusing on the founder and all, there IS something different about her. I never would’ve pegged her for a Christian ... not only because she is just too good looking either! Really it’s more about the kind of person she is. She’s simply not what I expected. Maybe when I have some time I’ll dig into this whole “founder” thing a little more deeply. For now, I’m really digging getting to know Hope (Oh gosh, I hope she never reads this, that would not be cool at all.)

Q: How do you judge a worldview, by the life of the founder or the abuses of the followers?

Thursday December 23

I’ve been nervous about the date, I mean, Christmas Eve service (keep reminding yourself, It’s not a date, it’s NOT a date!) I just don’t want to blow it with Hope. I think she could sense I was nervous or acting strangely around her, so she pulled me aside today and asked if everything was all right.

I tried to brush it off, because I didn’t want to tell her about my anticipation. She asked me if I was still feeling weird about the time I asked her out. I said no, and that wasn’t a lie this time, but she went on and explained that she thinks I’m a really great guy and she’s glad to have me as a friend but that she thinks I have things to work out in my life before I complicate it with a relationship. I didn’t need her to go there and I kind of wish she didn’t, but she had my curiosity piqued. I asked her what she meant by “things to work out.”

It was a little hard to hear, but I am glad for her honesty, it seemed sincere, not like an excuse. Most of all, I know she’s right. I have been in serious flux lately. I feel like I’m on the verge of a breakthrough or a breakdown. I’m hoping it’s a breakthrough, but I’m not sure what either one feels like, really, so who knows?

I told her that she’s right, I do need to work things out. That’s when she said, “You do, because this wrestling match you’re in, it’s the most important wrestling match of your life.”

It’s funny, the day after Thanksgiving I was wrestling a Blu-ray player away from that crazy woman, now here I am, the day before Christmas Eve (according to Hope) and I’m in a wrestling match with God. That has to be what this whole month has been. Too much has happened, too many things have begun to change. It’s the only thing that describes the tension I feel that either means I’m going to break free or snap.

A wrestling match with God, huh? Why doesn’t He just pin me and call it a day?

Q: Have you ever wrestled with God? If so how did it turn out? Are you wrestling with God about something in your life today? Explain.

Wednesday December 22

I asked Kate if I could take the kids to the mall to see Santa Claus. I wasn't sure she would be okay with it. I don't know how church-people fit Santa into the whole story. I'm confused enough as an adult. All I know is that pictures of little kids with Santa are about as cute as cute gets.

Grace and Dillon were more than excited as we waited in line. They were taking in every bit of this year's visit to the North Pole. The line barely moved. (Whose idea was this again?) The kids remained shockingly patient until we got up to the front. When it was our turn, Dillon charged ahead and climbed right on to Santa's lap while Grace and I waited back at the head of the line. I didn't hear what Dillon asked for but I did catch him telling Santa that he shouldn't expect any cookies at his house, that his mom says that cookies aren't healthy and that Santa looked "VERY unhealthy."

When it was Grace's turn I also tried to give her some privacy. Her face was very serious, a little cautious, and she spoke with an intense concentration. It was almost as if she were expecting Santa to take out his journal and write down precise notes.

On the way home Grace asked me if Santa was able to find baby Jesus back in that stable in Bethlehem to bring Him His first Christmas presents. I remembered the tip that Kate told me long ago whenever a kid asks you a question that has no easy answer: "What do YOU think?" I asked her. She said Santa probably did find baby Jesus because one Christmas Santa found her and Dillon in a hotel in Florida when they were on vacation. I told her it sounded good to me. She went on and said that she bet that Mary and Joseph didn't get any presents though, because God already gave them the best one.

I just think about those two, Mary and Joseph, not Grace and Dillon. The whole experience must have been really frightening for Mary. Joseph was good enough to take her in, but did he REALLY believe her story? Not only that, but she was told that she was going to give birth to God's Son? I'm sure she doubted herself sometimes. I wonder if that baby she held in her arms felt like a gift or a burden? I wonder if she felt relief or immense responsibility? Was she filled with faith or was the whole "Son of God" thing hard for even her to believe?

When I dropped the kids off, Rob was there. He sent them off to get their PJs on and asked me how everything went. I told him he has some incredible kids. Man, he sure does!

Q: The Christmas story hinges on Jesus being the true Son of God who was born in human flesh. Why might it be refreshing to have a God who took on full humanity to live among us?

Friday December 3

I'm stoked for the weekend. It's been a really long week! I'm planning to go with Kate and Rob and the kiddos to see the Christmas lights display in the park on Saturday. My niece and nephew are the coolest little kids. On one hand, they're wise beyond their years. On the other hand, they're so innocent—even naive about life. With all of the deep thinking and skepticism I've been living under, it's a nice escape to hang out with little ones who haven't been tainted for a minute in their world. Some days I wish I could go back there permanently. Besides, I love Christmas lights as much as they do, maybe even more! They're a nice break from the darkness of the year.

Oh yeah, check this out! I read that someone tweeted a link to a news story about the company Quanaxx. It appears all of their DVD and Blu-ray players have the tendency to catch fire; it's some kind of laser problem. They're trying to recall the bulk of them before people give them away as gifts. I'm glad I "dumped" mine in the store on Black Friday. I'm sure it's been recovered from the diaper aisle by now, and I secretly hope that "Ms. WWE" managed to get hers. It would serve her right for almost breaking my nose. Is that wrong of me? Probably. Too bad it's not the ONLY thing that's wrong with me.

For instance, lately this moodiness is really bothering me. Isn't that appropriate? I'm moody about my moodiness, right? I don't like being so negative all the time. If I can't stand being around myself I can only imagine what it's like to be around me! Part of this might have something to do with Hope and how positive she is, but I think I'm getting weary of myself. I realize I'm not a very good person. It comes in waves. Sometimes I feel a strong urge to try to become a better person, but after a while it fizzles and I could care less. Nothing ever changes really. How do some people get to be so good while I seem to get worse?

Q: How do you think a "bad" person becomes good, or vice versa?

Monday December 6

Lights were rocking as expected, I can't imagine how much work goes into hanging them just right. I can't even hang one strand in my window straight, right? They were exactly what I needed to get in the Christmas spirit. Besides, spending time with the family is always good for the heart!

I've begun to notice a change in Kate and Rob recently, even in the kids! They've started going to a church recently. It was a total shocker to me. I'm thinking they're doing it because they might feel it's important for their kids to learn morals. Maybe I'll feel differently about it when (if) I have my own kids, but I'm not sure I get it. Kate and I turned out fine and we NEVER went to church. We had good parents who taught us how to be good people.

Now maybe it's me and my attitude shift lately, but they seem more content and laid back than before. I can barely keep my work and social life together while maintaining a good attitude. They've got a hefty mortgage to pay, jobs to work, and kids to raise, but they're doing it all and doing it well.

One interesting bit of 411 came up while we were checking out the lights that I still need to look up. Get this- little Grace said that the reason for the lights is because Jesus is the light of the world. I'm not sure if that's historically accurate. In fact, I had always thought Christmas lights, trees, etc. were all of pagan origin. I heard that since December keeps getting darker and darker and more things keep dying off, the pagans would grow nervous about the sun going away forever. When the solstice came and they saw the sun no longer sinking into the southern sky, they would hold a festival. Obviously, I didn't argue with a 6 year old about this. It's really sweet that she thinks that everyone is putting up lights because of Jesus. I don't have the heart to tell her that it's just a "thing" we do now. But I guess I should do more research on this. Add that to my to-do list of things to look up on Wiki.

Q: Are there any Christmas/holiday traditions you know the origins of?  
If not, select one you're curious about and look up the history.

Tuesday December 21

Big news! Hope asked me out today! Except it's not exactly a date, she invited me to her church on Christmas Eve. And it's not just us; she also invited Jack (he said "no" of course). I told her I will go. I figure it's not much time. It IS Christmas Eve but I can still hang with my family later. Besides, her church can't be that awful of a place if she likes it there. Truthfully though, I DO have an ulterior motive. This is probably as close to a "date" as I'll get for now and that's really ok.

I wonder if it'll be as crazy as the Christmas program at Kate and Rob's church? Maybe we should get there early?

Speaking of Kate and Rob, I got to see Grace and Dillon last night. They are so excited about Christmas. It takes me back to when I was a kid; Christmas was the biggest event of the year. Except for them I think it's different. Dillon keeps talking about being excited about baby Jesus' birthday. They're even baking Him a birthday cake. Grace says that's why we give gifts to each other, out of excitement for Jesus' birth (it sounds fishy to me historically, which reminds me I never looked up the "Christmas lights" thing). Historical or not, I don't really care. I think they're on to something much nobler than I ever was. It's almost as if I see the same thing in them that I saw in that teenaged kid and his caroling friends. It's the same thing I see in Hope as she listens to Jack's nonsense and then responds with such a different attitude and tone than his. It's this happiness over knowing God that they seem to want to share with the entire world around them. Not because they are trying to be right or because they want everyone to think like they do, but because they want to share something that is making their lives good, meaningful, and beautiful.

Q: What's a great thing you've found in life that you love to share with others?  
Do you think that when Christians are sharing their faith, they're doing the same? How does that kind of motive reframe what you know of Christians?

Monday December 20

Things are nuts at work. Everyone is in a frenzy because of Christmas. Strangely I'm calmer than I have ever been at this time of year. All that has been happening within me, first the depression, then the restlessness and the questioning, and all that Hope has brought into my life, it's all got me thinking differently about Christmas. I remember that text that Kate sent me right after the Black Friday fiasco about something brand new bursting out. I feel like that's been happening.

I started reading the part of the Bible called "Isaiah" just because Kate said that she was. I'm not sure I'll keep reading it. It's a very confusing book. I'm only on the first page and so far God seems angry, but looking at the people I can't exactly blame him. It sounds like they've been pretty ungrateful and rebellious. But then there's this moment where God pushes through His anger and says really kind words to the people. He says that He'll take away the horrible things they've done and give them the best land to live in and eat from. He even mentions making something as "white as wool." I'm not sure if there is a connection there to the whole "Lamb" thing.

Kate said that a lot of Isaiah's words are prophecies that are fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. She said that he talks in graphic detail about Jesus coming as a man hundreds of years before He did (footnote Isaiah 7:14). She even says that there are sections that describe His death in vivid detail—again, hundreds of years before He ever came (footnote Isaiah 52:13—53:12). If all of that is true, that is nothing short of incredible.

For me, it all goes back to that humility and servanthood concept. For hundreds of years (maybe longer?) this was God's plan, to come to earth, to serve, and then to die? No power grabs or guilt trips? If this is what God came to do AND if this was all truly foretold long, long before He ever came, then that means God (if He is really out there) is just like what Hope has been talking about.

Not bad for my first spin reading the Bible! Still, if I try to read more of it, I'm going to look for a part that's a little more understandable.

Q: What do the prophecies about Jesus, written down hundreds of years before He came, suggest to you about the truth of the Christian story?

Tuesday December 7

I had a really weird dream last night. I was walking into work, Hope was walking beside me and we were talking. I had my hands full of all my stuff, when suddenly my stuff let out a squeal. I looked down and it was a baby. Next I was walking in the middle of a scorching desert all alone. The baby was gone, but I could hear it crying way off in the distance. I knew I needed to find it but I kept running into all kinds of strange obstacles: a river, a herd of buffalo (in the desert?), and a polka dotted freight train. I heard Jack laughing at me from somewhere and as I looked around to find him, I noticed that I was only in my underwear. When I looked up again, I was in front of my old high school geometry class and everyone was laughing at me. I woke up startled, in a total sweat. What was that about?

It bothered me all day today so I decided to ask Anya about it. She's this hippie-girl at work who is all about teas, yoga, and anything mystical. I decided to put pride on the line and share the dream with her. She listened intently and then rattled off with a steady conviction her interpretation. I wish I recorded everything she said. All I can remember for sure is that she said that baby was an unmistakable representation of my inner child, which I must have lost during a traumatic event in high school or at the zoo. Okay. Interesting!

At the tale-end of Anya's "reading," Hope walked by. She waited until Anya was finished and walked away. "Had a strange dream?" She asked. I told her "yes," blushing as if answering her question made her privy to all of the dream's details.

Her answer was unexpected. She said that lots of people in the Bible had strange dreams, but usually awoke understanding what they meant. Then she went on and told me about Joseph, the man who was engaged to Mary when she was pregnant with Jesus. She said that Joseph struggled to believe Mary's story for a little while (he knew for sure that he wasn't the father!) until he had a dream where an angel told him that this was truly from God. Joseph was so convinced by his dream that he went through with it! He took Mary home as his wife.

If this is true, that must have been some dream. I can only imagine how it must've haunted him. This freaky dream of mine that makes no sense has been bothering me all day. Joseph heard such a clear message that he did something that was unthinkable for people in his day ... some dream.

Sometimes I wish I'd get a clear message telling me what I'm supposed to do with my life. Or that I'd get answers to at least a few of these questions I have lately.

Q: As you think about Joseph taking Mary to be his wife, what does that tell you about his character? How do you think his faith helped him through what must've been a very difficult and confusing time in his life? Has faith ever helped you through something tough?

I know she was just kidding around, but really? Is God really concerned about me knowing Him and Him knowing me? That's so hard for me to understand and believe. Especially because He's already got people like Hope, Rob, and Kate, and so many others. Why would He worry about me?

Hope's card and gift made me feel really good. I don't understand why she works so hard to be such a good friend to me.

Q: What do you think about the verses above? Do all who genuinely seek, find? How has this been true or untrue in your own life?

Friday December 17

Today I had a nice, very unexpected surprise at work. When I got to my desk, there was a small package sitting right in the middle of it. Since my mama raised me right, I opened the card first and of course looked down to the very bottom to see who it was from. It was from Hope.

Here's what it said,

*"I don't want to sound condescending, but I'm so proud of you for your open mindedness lately. I just want to encourage you to keep checking things out. There is a verse from the Bible that I've always found helpful when I've been searching for truth and direction. The speaker is "Wisdom," but that's just a metaphor for what comes from God Himself. It says,*

*"I love those who love Me,  
and those who seek Me find Me."*

*- Proverbs 8:17*

*Jesus says something very similar in Matthew 7:7-8. Look it up sometime!*

*Keep looking, I believe you'll find what you're looking for.*

*Love & Friendship,*

*Hope*

I sat the card down and ripped open the box, there was a little handmade nativity scene. It was very small and simple, abstract yet stylish, just as I would expect from Hope. I took it out and put it on my desk, partially just because I wanted her to see it later.

I must've read that card over a dozen times.

Hope dropped by later and I thanked her for my card and gift. I told her that things had been confusing lately, and I really hoped her verse was right and that I'd figure things out soon. She told me about how after Jesus was born, wisemen or astrologers came from the East in search of Jesus. Remarkably, they found Him because a star led them to right where He was. She said that she was sure that God would send a star if that's what was needed to get me where He wanted me to be.

Wednesday December 8

Something cool happened tonight, I think. When I got home from work and was walking from my car into my building, I saw a group of teenagers clumped together on the sidewalk. They were acting all mischievous and teenager-ey. As I approached them, I worked up my most tough and intimidating stare. They needed to know that I was "on" to them.

One of them, a good-looking athletic kid near the front of the group ran up ahead of the group and approached me. I reached back into my childhood to find the memory of my dad's most disapproving look ever and tried my best to replicate it as the kid approached.

"Sir," he said, "can we give you something?" I was convinced it would be a barrage of snowballs or something equally menacing. Before I could answer him he motioned for the others and they quickly joined him and fanned out in two straight lines in front of me. Just as I was readying myself for whatever trouble they were about to bring, they broke out singing, "Away in a Manger," and it was incredible. These kids were really good.

As they sang my mind flashed back to my dream, to some of the conversations of the last week, to the story of Joseph. It was a moment where it all came swirling together.

I didn't even notice when they had finished the song, I was so lost in the moment. After I realized that they were waiting for some kind of response, I said, "umm, that was great, are you looking for money? I have a little." The good-looking athletic kid laughed it off, "no" he said. "We just wanted to brighten your Christmas by reminding you how much God loves you." Then he handed me a little card with these words,

"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people ... a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord." (footnote: Luke 2:11)

I was really struggling to keep up with what was happening. It was all so incongruent. Mischievous teenagers who sing like angels coming to brighten my Christmas? Really? Why? A good-looking athletic kid saying words like "God loves you"? Why would they go so far out of their way to tell me that? It just didn't seem to fit. Nothing fits lately.

Q: Has a stranger ever surprised you with an act of kindness? What was that like? What do you think motivated him/her?

Thursday December 9

Tonight I went with Kate and Rob to see the kids in their Christmas program. These things are way different than I imagined.

I walked into the church in disbelief of all the video cameras I saw. It must've been like this in the old land-grab days of the Homestead Act; people were staking claim to any piece of space they could manage to hold down. Tripods were planted all over the floor. Coats, purses, and programs were strategically placed on seats to save as many of them as possible.

Being new to this whole world, I didn't realize the necessity of showing up early, and so I came far too late to get any of the good spots. Kate and Rob, also being new to this, saved me a spot but didn't realize how forcefully they'd needed to defend their territory. While they were distracted, getting their own camera ready, a whole family moved in on their turf leaving no room for me.

I made the best effort I could to find a spot. As I walked down the aisle though, I realized I was being frozen out. No one would make eye contact.

In the second to last row, I finally found a willing party; an old woman in her 80s saw my desperation and waved me over as she scooted to make room. There wasn't much, but it was better than standing in the doorway for the whole thing.

The program started late, but man was it sweet! Grace and Dillon were mostly just human scenery, but I was a proud uncle all the same.

The high point of the whole night was when the kids all gathered around this tiny manger with an 8-year-old Mary and Joseph holding a baby-doll Jesus. Of all things, they sang "Away in a Manger." Honestly, I think I might be cracking up because before it was over, I could feel my eyes welling up a little with tears. I tried to give my eyes a nonchalant wipe, when I saw the old woman looking dead at me. Busted, I laughed an uneasy laugh and shrugged. "Don't be embarrassed dear," she said, "I'm a very old woman who has heard this story for 80 years but it gets me every time!"

I still don't know what she meant because I don't know WHY I felt so moved. But I really am afraid that I'm coming undone. This is not like me at all.

Q: Is there any part of your Christmas observance that is especially moving to you? Anything about the Christmas story itself?

Thursday December 16

The conversation between Jack and Hope has really stuck with me. So I decided to get over my wounded ego from Hope's rejection and ask HER the question that's been bothering me. It's the whole question about the church sign: the "Jesus naughty list" and the "Lamb's book."

After I asked her about what it all meant, she laughed. But it wasn't a "You're an idiot" laugh, but more of an "I know exactly what you mean" kind. I'm pretty sure I heard a hint of relief in her laugh too. She obviously knew I had been keeping a lower profile around her after the failed ask-out attempt, she seemed glad to be conversing again.

She started by apologizing on behalf of the people who put such confusing things on church signs. I appreciated that. Then she talked about "the Lamb" reference. Apparently, "the Lamb" is a reference to Jesus. In the ancient days He was seen as a sacrifice for the sins of the people. Jewish people used to sacrifice lambs to God for their sins. Honestly, the sacrifice idea is a little hard for me to get my head around. I don't know how killing animals does anything to make God happy, but at least I understood who "the Lamb" was. Hope pointed out that it's a term of weakness, a reminder of His humility and sacrifice for the good of the world.

The "Lamb's book" is a reference (from Revelation I think she said) about how people whose names are written in "the Lamb's book of life" are the ones who will receive life forever at the end of time. That's when I jumped in and tried to make the link ... so Jesus is like Santa Claus, if you're good you'll get your name written in the "Lamb's book" and get life forever?

"Not at all," is what she said back. She said that to get your name in "the Lamb's book of life" you only had to receive the forgiveness of God that Jesus came to offer, and come back into a trusting, restored relationship with God.

I have so many questions still. How do you receive forgiveness? How do you have a relationship with God? I'm relieved to know that God isn't keeping a naughty list, but I'm surprised that my behavior has nothing to do with whether or not I'm "in" or "out" of God's little black book. It all seems so illogical right now.

Q: If God's point in sending Jesus wasn't only to forgive people, but to reconcile with them, then what does that say about God?

Wednesday December 15

Things are still awkward between Hope and me. I can tell she's trying her best, I just feel a LITTLE angry and a LOT dumb. Thankfully, Jack has stepped into the void with his insatiable need to debate with his favorite "opponent."

The guy can't restrain himself. I think he sees each argument with Hope as a battle for territory in the great war over ME. Today they started talking about evil in the world. He was reading the paper and there was this horrible shooting that happened last night in the city. A young girl was hit mistakenly and killed, less than 10 days before Christmas.

Jack somehow ignored the tragedy (and the normal human response that we know of as "compassion") and submitted it as evidence in his case against God. He argued until his self satisfaction took over and he rested his case.

Hope, in her easygoing, non-defensive way simply said that maybe evil is a result of a flaw in the character of humanity—not God—and that she believes that God is at work fixing it.

Jack said that any real god could have fixed it by now.

Hope said something like this, "What if the problem is so deep that it's in the fabric of who we are as people? What if fixing the problem is as delicate as removing cancer from a major organ?" She said that in doing surgery to go after a tumor, it doesn't make sense to be hasty about it, because you might kill the patient.

If I were speaking to Hope right now I might've told her that she is brilliant, but instead I kept listening. She went on to talk about a part of the Bible where Jesus tells a story about a farmer who plants a field full of wheat. (footnote: Matthew 13:24-29) Later an enemy comes in and puts a bunch of weeds in with the wheat. Some overzealous guy (like Jack) wants to tear out all the weeds but the farmer says to wait, because he doesn't want any of the wheat torn up with the weeds accidentally.

Hope said that God IS doing something about evil in the world, that's what Christmas is all about, but that evil is such a delicate problem to solve because it's not only "out there" but it's "in us."

I wonder does she include herself in that statement as well? Can someone like Hope really mean that there is evil inside of her too?

Q: When you think about God's role in the world do you see Him as someone who is allowing problems or working toward a solution?

Friday December 10

Ah sweet Friday! Friday is definitely my "high and holy day" each week, you just can't beat it.

After reflecting a bit, I think I figured out what happened to me at the Christmas program. Part of it was the sweetness of those kids, their sincerity and naïveté. I guess being an uncle is making me soft. But the other part I figured out as Jack tried to start another argument with Hope about religion and all of its evils. Seriously, he's the most stubborn guy I've ever met!

It was a typical "Jack rant." "Religion is all about power and control, taking away people's freedom, creating mindless masses," and so on.

Hope listened to him carefully, as if it was the first time she had heard any of this before, though I'm sure it wasn't. Then she explained her view in a way that I don't think I've ever heard it said before. "God must not be THAT interested in power or control if He sent His Son into the world as a baby!"

Click. Suddenly I understood what was going on at the Christmas program. Rationally, it makes no sense to me that God would do that. What kind of strategy is THAT? My dad always used to joke when we were playing cards. When I'd put up something weak in the attempt to win the hand, he'd say, "Don't send a boy to do a man's job!" Yet, that is exactly what God supposedly did. He sent not just a boy but a baby.

At the same time, if it's true, it's so disarming. I think of my little Grace and Dillon, how powerless they are. If that's what God was doing, then Hope is right, you can't claim that He's about power and control. How can you ignore the vulnerability of it all, the risk, and the love?

Then Hope said that there is a Bible passage that she loves that describes the character of her "founder." I don't remember the verse but it was something about how Jesus didn't consider it important to try to prove Himself equal with His Father, but instead He made Himself nothing and took on the role of a servant and even let Himself be born as a human (footnote Philippians 2:5-8).

I've known that this is what Christians believe, that Jesus was the Son of God, but this angle about servanthood and humility, this is all new to me. Not just new, but surprising. I never thought that God could be that way.

Q: When you think of God, what adjectives come to mind?

Monday December 13

This was the first Monday that I've looked forward to in a long time. Lately I can't wait to get back to work to see my friends, especially Hope. I'm definitely going to ask her out. By definitely, I mean probably ... or possibly, if I can get up the nerve. This is not like me to feel so under-confident about a girl. Maybe Jack is right, maybe she IS way out of my league.

Besides, I think Jack would flip out if I went out with Hope. He tries to fight with her every chance he gets. I think it makes him mad that she's a Christian, but it makes him madder that she's so smart and always keeps her cool, and never gets red in the face like he does when they discuss tense things. I've always bought into the "bros first" mentality, but now a chance with Hope makes crossing Jack ALMOST seem worth it. Still, I do think she's out of my league.

Oh that reminds me, the other day I was driving around and I passed this little church that had a sign out front. It was one of those signs where you can slide in letters to make different messages. I've been deliberately trying to pay more attention to what's going on in the churches/synagogues/mosques around me, even though I know it's about the founder and not the followers. Well, this sign confused the heck out of me. It said,

"Jesus is making a list ... He's checking it twice. Is your name written in the Lamb's book of life?"

I don't know exactly who "the Lamb" is supposed to be. I think it's safe to assume that Shari Lewis' puppet has nothing to do with it? The whole thing about Jesus making a list ... that's what makes me think that Hope is out of my league. Not just her, but all of the stuff she stands for. I wouldn't want to see the "list" that God might have on me. Not only that, but I think it's completely unfair to keep record of all this stuff without even warning anyone. It's like those ridiculous "red-light cameras" that are going up everywhere to bust people who just barely miss the yellow traffic light. I want to ask Hope about it, but I'm worried about what she'll say. Argh.

Q: If God kept a list on you like Santa Claus, what do you think the conclusion would be, naughty or nice?

Tuesday December 14

I did it! Well, almost. Today it was just Hope and I standing in the lunch room and we were talking about how we spent last weekend. We were just making small talk when I asked her what she had going on THIS weekend. At first I didn't realize what a great setup this was, but when she said, "Nothing," I saw that it was the perfect moment to ask her out.

So I went for it. I asked her if maybe she'd like to do something Friday or Saturday. It immediately got awkward. She kept smiling but I could see as her smile lost some steam. She was clearly searching for the right words but I couldn't endure it. I knew a rejection was coming so before she could turn me down, I withdrew the offer. I told her laughingly—and way too overconfidently (I'm such an idiot sometimes)—that I forgot about this big family thing this weekend so we'd have to try for another time. This "big family thing" was a big lie, of course. Just one more thing to add to my "naughty list."

I expected to see relief on her face, but I didn't. She looked like maybe she still wanted to say something difficult. So before she could totally reject me, I told her I needed to get back to work and bolted out of the room.

I couldn't face her the rest of the day. It was SO awkward. I may have messed things up forever.

Kate happened to call me later in the day, she never calls which I thought was a little odd; we're texters. I filled her in on what had happened. She was surprisingly cheerful at my devastation. She said that it sounded like Hope was really the right kind of person to have in my life and that I should be grateful for her friendship at any level. I begrudgingly agreed.

She said she's been reading through this part of the Bible called "Isaiah" and that in chapter 42 it says that God won't brush aside the bruised and the hurt and He won't disregard anyone, even the small people or the lowly (footnote Isaiah 42:3-4). She said that she thought God had a plan for me and that I shouldn't get too depressed.

It sounds very different than the church sign about Jesus and the Lamb's list. I really need to ask someone about that.

Q: To whom do you look when you're feeling rejected, brushed aside, or bruised in life? What do they do for you?