

Faith



Life Actually By Kari Kampakis The gift of Christmas grace

It was a simple task, really, and one that many families had successfully carried out before us.

Our church asked our family to take care of baby Jesus in the week leading up to Christmas. On the last Sunday of Advent, we set up the Nativity. We then brought Jesus to our home for safekeeping, swaddled in a purple blanket.

It was thirty minutes before the start of Christmas Eve Mass, as I was rushing to get ready and sweep everyone out the door, when the accident occurred. One of my daughters was carrying Jesus around in the swaddle when suddenly he slipped out of the purple cloth.

The wooden figure broke in two places, around the ankle and the wrist.

I couldn't believe what had happened, but then again, I could. I'd worried all along that this might happen, but even my worst scenario didn't play out like this, right before the service. As my family drove to church, I was upset and tense. I wondered why we couldn't be normal and handle this sacred assignment.

Naturally the church was packed, and as we walked into the vestibule, the two priests leading the service waved me over. They quickly shared instructions of how our

family would walk in the procession behind the Gospel carrier, head to the Nativity, and give baby Jesus to the priest so he could lay Jesus in the manger.

I nodded ... and with a knot in my stomach and a deep breath, I admitted what had happened thirty minutes earlier. There was a brief silence as the priests absorbed the event and I apologized profusely, promising to replace baby Jesus or fix him. I told them how this wooden figure was currently super-glued back together and would require careful handling.

Much to my relief, both priests responded kindly to my embarrassing confession. They told me it was OK, that these things happen.

And then, to my surprise, one of them asked which daughter accidentally dropped Jesus. He wanted to have a quick word with her.

I'll never forget the look on my daughter's face as she saw Father Bob walking toward her in his formal Christmas robes. She looked so frightened that my heart went out to her, and as she dropped her head in shame, refusing to make eye contact, I knew this encounter would have a lifelong impact.

Thankfully, Father Bob was not there to lecture my daughter. Instead he offered her comfort, using his position of authority to

reassure her tender heart.

"Sweetheart," he said, crouching to her level, "it's okay. Remember how I told you last week that we've lost donkey ears and other pieces over the years? We have a man who can fix these things. It's happened before. Please don't worry about it."

I could literally see the heavy blanket of shame lift off my daughter's shoulders as Father Bob showed her love when she least expected it. It was amazing to witness the relief on her face as she cautiously and slowly lifted her head, looked him in his eyes, and smiled.

Then and there, she experienced the gift of grace. She gained a real-world understanding of how her heavenly Father loves her. I couldn't help but note the timing of this grace too, and how fitting that it came on the eve of Jesus' birthday.

Brokenness and grace go hand in hand. And while it's easy to assume that God expects absolute perfection from us (and nothing less), the truth is that God loves us even when we mess up. He sent His son down from heaven to save us, not condemn us.

In Mark 2:17 Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but

sinners." What this means is that there's hope for everyone. The mistakes we believe will shut doors with God can actually open doors if we honestly go before Him, admit what we did, and ask for forgiveness.

My daughter's mishap with baby Jesus ultimately led to grace. It allowed her to witness the merciful side of God that I hope will enrich and deepen her faith.

This Christmas season, I hope you'll remember how that grace is available to you as well. Even when your head is hanging, even when you're burdened by a sense of shame, God is ready to show you love. Through the birth of Jesus, He delivered grace into our world, a grace that can transform your life and your future when your heart is open to receive it.

Kari Kubiszyn Kampakis is a Mountain Brook mom of four girls, columnist and blogger for The Huffington Post. She has written two books for teen and tween girls, "Liked: Whose Approval Are You Living For?" and "10 Ultimate Truths Girls Should Know," that are available online and everywhere books are sold. You can join Kari's Facebook community at "Kari Kampakis, Writer," visit her blog at karikampakis.com or contact her at kari@karikampakis.com.

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