

2002: wrapping paper, turkeys and a sandwich

We walked into this year of Grace with some uncertainty. With a new baby at home and the pending sale of Louis' employer, change was imminent. We began asking some tough questions about where we belong, where God wanted us, our future... We wish we could say we are past all that. We're not, but we have learned a great deal this year. Our expectation of living, exemplified this year, should not be responding to instant, aimless change, but more like unwrapping a Christmas present - one layer at a time. Each tear increases not only our anticipation of the gift but our appreciation of the Giver.

For a regular year, the anniversaries in our extended families were pretty sparse, with the exception of Louis' father's 60th birthday. Wedding bells were silent and Louis' brother Riaan and his wife Nelhari will only be sharing their newborn pictures after this year has ended, albeit by mere days.

So what happened in 2002 anyway? As I (Louis) cast my eyes back over the mountain range of the past twelve months I see the winding path my family has climbed. I see the markers on the edge of the cliffs. Places we stopped and didn't fall off! (Now Jake did fall out of a tree, but that's...different). I see viewpoints from where we surveyed the valley and wondered where we were and where we were going. I see the markers of those who have gone before us on the trail. Like David, who left some markers to show those who follow how to walk the trail - he didn't fear evil because his Shepherd's staff gave him comfort.

Shortly after the beginning of the year we were encouraged that this season, undoubtedly full of new things, was meant to be a time of rest for us. By approaching the trail from this perspective, we anticipated and lingered at the rest-stops. Through my changing work schedule, I was able to spend much time at home with Lee and the children, especially Jake. The impact of this bonding at such a moldable time in his life (hey, mine too) is unquantifiable. Jake and his Daddy went for jogs around the block, to the park (no, we drive if it is further than the block), the zoo, and the library (so we can sit in those tiny chairs and read stories)! I discovered that life exists, and doesn't stop, outside the office building. In fact, I wonder if it isn't really the other way around.

For Lee's birthday in March we went skiing with friends up at Big Bear! We rented a big cabin and Jake skied for the first time (at 34 months he was the youngest the instructor had taken up the slopes). Dad was alongside to get it on video, although the lesson really helped him too!

In April, Lee's parents were here for Jake's 'Bob-the-builder' birthday. The party was a great success because Lee is a star around kids and made everyone feel part of the well-oiled party machine. The dump-truck jumper that filled the back yard helped to exhaust the kids, and Jake got his first bicycle - a memorable gift from his oupa & oupa Tiger.

After concluding my work in July, we had the opportunity to visit South Africa for an extended period of time which otherwise would not have been possible. The trip itself was exhausting (with two toddlers need we say more? Okay, the airline lost our baggage), but it was great to see everyone we love "back home". The kids spent fun time with all their "oupa's", "ouma's", cousins and the puppies at uncle Riaan's new house. They will long be remembered as the days Cathy started walking and Jake got to see all the animals he thought lived in the zoo. He saw his first lion with oupa Jake and almost became crocodile lunch all in the same day. He got to ride a horse (the kind that doesn't need coins), play with his uncle Herbie's turkeys on "a farm in Africa" and fish in a real dam. Preciously, Lee's grandfather was able to celebrate his 78th birthday with Cathy, his 17th great-grandchild, on his knee. In Frankfurt our family made "new" friends with the Botha's on the way back to L.A. and we were able to spend some time with Louis' brother Francois and the new uber-GPS/autopilot in his BMW.

Other fun trips that decorated the year for us were the Santa Barbara zoo with the Kellers, Magic Mountain with Lee's parents, the Fire-station visit with the McDonalds, Disneyland with the Bradders, miniature train rides and pony rides on the "fast ones".

Our 2nd annual year-end Eksteen break-away was held at Fallbrook, a won't-be-small-for-much-longer farming community outside San Diego. It was a peaceful time, to celebrate and reflect on the passing year. We brought home memories of picking up acorns in the park, crawling through hay-mazes and having dinner in a renovated fire station.

One of the biggest adjustments in our house this year was parenting (some days we just call it surviving) two children. The term “double for your trouble” has new meaning - the double is permanent but the trouble seems to at least come and go (but not always in the same direction!). Thankfully, Jake and Cathy have become great friends. He even shares some of his toys and snacks with her. Okay, not always, but he is doing more than we thought possible for a pre-schooler.

Louis’ hair was one of the sub-themes this year. It continued its recessionary trend of the prior year, spent some time in transition, had a new release over the summer, got downsized (shaven) and then repositioned itself in the fall as a beard. After a good run, which upset some critics, the beard sadly but finally relented when Lee complained “it tickles too much”.

Cathy’s year was... Well talk about “growing” in a year! Her development made an interesting parallel to that of her family this year (and we parents thought we were here to teach the kids...). She started the year lying on her back, unable to even get up, just puzzled with what’s going on around her and seemingly helpless to change her surroundings. Fast forward to today - she just wandered into the room, climbed on to my lap, is chugging down some juice from a sippi-cup, one handed, while pointing at the computer screen and trying to tell me something about it. Wow! She has been a blessing, a motivator, an agent of love and more in her first calendar year...without the burden of “that’s what I’m supposed to do”. (Thirty-odd years on and we’re still aspiring to that).

Dad did at least learn some things this year. (Lee too, but I have a sneaky suspicion she’s known this stuff all along without letting on. I thank her for graciously letting me learn them). I learned that children spell love with four letters: T-I-M-E. I learned that the best gift I could possibly give our children is a wonderful marriage. I learned the best way for our marriage to succeed is to pray with my wife every day. I discovered that nothing captivates the attention of a growing kid more than a creative story told at meal time (especially the ones I make up as I go). And then Lee, Jake and I also learned the Winnie-the-Pooh theme song.

Jake’s vocabulary exploded this year and he sings beautifully (he got that from his Dad). Now before you think we’re trying to brag here, it’s not the singing that’s remarkable. It’s that he is singing songs with words when he can’t read them yet! One song echoes “I want to praise [You for] the wonders of Your mighty love”. Jake is one of these wonders. I know that because yesterday, when he and I were sitting in a coffee shop, sharing a sandwich and some juice, I asked him “Jake, what do you want to be when you grow up?” His reply was as much unexpected as it is unforgettable. In between bites he says “I want to be doing fun things with my Daddy.”

Between all the peaks throughout this year, Jake ascended to a summit on December 8th when he welcomed Jesus into his heart. The declaration that resounded from the top of the dining room table: “Jesus is God!!” was unrehearsed and irrevocable. We are thankful that the Lord has staked His claim early into his young, wild heart!

Along this year’s trail we learned that, before God can give you the new things He has for you, He has to stretch you first. It’s almost like having a baby, which we are. Yes, Lee is feeling the “enlarge my territory” part of the Jabez-prayer first hand. We are stretching physically and have also felt the stretching emotionally.

One thing hasn’t changed from a year ago - we end the year expecting big changes in the coming year. There will be a lot of new things “added” - an added job, an added child, an added room to the house. It seems like only yesterday (actually it was February 1999) when we were pregnant (with Jake), Louis started a new job and we bought our first house - all at once! Since then we’ve realized that the exuberance of youth is accompanied by the absence of fear. But since we did it before, we should be more able to do it again. Right?!

Upon leaving 2002, we thank God for His presents as well as His presence. We are especially blessed by our relationships with friends and family like you who share memories, encourage us, pray for us and show interest in what we are becoming as a family. We cherish our memories of being together with you and eagerly anticipate the next time we can add more of them to our treasure chest and to yours.

There’ll be some glorious views to see, in Two Thousand and Three
Love,

Louis, Lee, Jake, Cathy and (t-6m)baby Eksteen
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