

This is a different kind of Christmas letter for us, inspired by a reminder of the blessings in our lives. Most of you will have seen the news on the November EF-4 tornado in Illinois. If you are keeping score at home, a 4 means 190 mph winds. In this case, from a thousand foot wide funnel that was on the ground for 45 miles. One mile of which stretched through our block. 1,200 pound round bales disintegrate in 190 mph winds. Corn stalks go through sheet metal at 190 mph. We have a lot of corn stalks and round bales around here.

We were in the basement shelter, but blessed to be unaffected. Not so for our neighbors. One came home and instead of house, garage, and barn, saw a smashed combine in an empty lot. Everything else was erased. Another came home to find no top floor, no barns, and a dozen large trees down. Another, the one Keith starting helping from the night of the tornado, came home to find the house twisted on the foundation, 3 barns collapsed, and 2 tractors smashed. One family from Megan's very small school community lost their house. Two bartenders with young families at our favorite local brewery lost their homes. Everyone around here was directly or knows someone affected. A little heavy for the Christmas letter, you're thinking. But if Christmas is about love, hope, and faith, then we don't think there is a better story to tell.

None of those families were scratched. There were at church, as were literally hundreds of others whose homes were destroyed. Several large churches straddle the path, but not one was hit. Clearly *our* church needs to rethink its schedule, since we were home already. Our neighbors handled this with astounding grace; a reaction so common that we forgot how unusual it was. The difference between what is really important and the things that were lost was staggeringly clear. Within hours of the storm, every one of our neighbors had 20+ people – many strangers – there to start clean up. Most showed up with hands, others with tools and equipment, but nobody waited to be told what to do or for help to show up from somewhere else. Everyone got fed, everyone got shelter. The donation warehouses filled up overnight. When Illinois emergency management showed up they had to ask where the homeless people were.

There has been inspiration in the catastrophe. Many times wished we could be in more than one place at once to help. But you do what you can and say a prayer for the rest. And with that, back to our regularly scheduled Christmas letter programming – what's up with the family?

The Megan has the schedule of a 30-something with a personal assistant. Attending and loving Montessori school again this year. Outside of school is drama club (oh yes, Megan and drama), piano, tumbling, tae kwon do (purple belt), chess club, starting 4H, art club (loves it), swimming (loved summer, not so much this winter). Horses are pretty much on vacation through the winter.

Mason is a funny little guy, and our own tornado. No, not potty trained yet at 3.5. Don't start. Plenty of snappy remarks like, "I pooped" (insert "in my pull ups, again"). Or walking up to the 4H leader (complete stranger) and saying, "Hey sir, nice truck." It was funny if you were there. Still in glasses... oops, no, they're lost again. Thank God we have new health care to pay for them... scratch that.

Jo is about to be a certified veterinary chiropractor, still working at the small animal clinic as the business manager but now started taking more appointments with clients. We'll be figuring out how to start up a horse chiropractic business. Dog and horse owners are the only ones crazy enough to hire veterinary chiropractors. Jo will delete the preceding line upon review.

Keith is at Cat. Brown belt in TKD. Keith learned he does not like it when Jo travels for work and wonders how she did it when he was traveling all those years. Must have been the homecomings.

Much love and best wishes for a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year – Keith, Jo, Megan, & Mason

