

165: The gift of love at Christmas (and new Advent paper chain!) with Majors Emmanuel and Jennifer Masango

Ok, trivia time:

- What is the color of Santa's suit?
- Can you name the animal that pulls Santa's sleigh?
- Why is Christmas celebrated across the world?

Or rather, how do you explain the story of Christmas to kids?



In a season filled with celebration and merriment and presents and fun...as parents we, of course, want to help our kids understand and appreciate the reason for it all, the gift we were given, the birth of Christ.

Majors Emmanuel and Jennifer Masango understand this well as the parents of three boys and also as Salvation Army officers, or pastors, currently serving as Western Territorial Youth Secretary and Territorial Candidates' & Recruitment Secretary, respectively.

Their best tip? Keep it simple and be intentional.

And we have just the new Advent resource to do just that and enjoy a small meaningful moment with your family throughout this season, which they'll tell you more about. You can find it at caringmagazine.org/advent and I am inviting you to grab that resource today, involve your kids in a fun family night coloring and putting together a classic paper countdown chain to hang in your home this Christmas and remind you of that greatest gift of love.

In this episode, the Masangos share more about it all and how to celebrate a meaningful season this year.

Show highlights include:

- What the Masangos love most about Christmas.
- What Christmas looks like in their home.
- What they love most about The Salvation Army at Christmas.
- A Christmas story that stands out to them.

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- How they explain Advent through their role as parents and pastors.
- How they see families increase meaning behind the holiday season.
- What they love most about The Salvation Army's new Advent paper chain.
- Why love is a fitting theme for Christmastime.
- Why The Salvation Army focuses on the theme of Love Beyond.
- How they encourage parents to bring meaning to the season with their family.

[Listen and subscribe to the Do Gooders Podcast now.](#) Below is a transcript of the episode, edited for readability. For more information on the people and ideas in the episode, see the links at the bottom of this post.

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Christin Thieme: Majors Emmanuel and Jennifer Masango, thank you so much for joining me today on the Do Gooders Podcast.

Jennifer Masango: Thank you for having us.

Emmanuel Masango: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Christin Thieme: Yes. We are kicking off the season of Christmas, which is a big time in The Salvation Army and obviously in the Christian calendar in general. Everybody loves Christmas, right? So I would love to start out hearing a little bit about what do you love most about Christmas?

Emmanuel Masango: I'll go first. Two things I really love about Christmas is that it's just a season where people seems to be generally more joyful, more generous. I just feel like I see more smiles on people's faces around Christmastime, and I just really love that. I love celebrations in general, and Christmas is just really a whole season full of celebrations. I love a party.

Christin Thieme: It's true. Nonstop celebrations.

Jennifer Masango: Yeah, for me, I love it that it's just at least a month long, if not longer. It's October now and people already have decorations out to buy. It's just kind of this buildup. It's exciting, it's fun.

Christin Thieme: What does Christmas morning typically look like in your home? You guys have three boys, right? So maybe you can tell us a little bit about your family and then what it looks like on an average year in your house.

Jennifer Masango: We have three boys, Manu, who's 15, Taona, who is 13, and Farai, who is 10. Three boys. Lots of excitement. I will say there's not a lot of sleep probably that happens on Christmas Eve. They're just so excited about waking up the next morning. Actually, our son even last week said, "I couldn't sleep last night." And I was like, "Why? Are you worried about something?" And he's like, "I just got to thinking about Christmas." So he was literally excited months ahead of time.

But typically, probably for Christmas morning, everybody's up early. We'll kind of tease them that we're going to make a big breakfast before we open presents, in which you definitely hear the, "Please, no, let us just do cereal." We'll have cereal or something, kind of relax a little bit and then open up some presents. We often try to just make sure to be intentional, even in reading maybe the story in Luke, how he shares about Jesus and the gospel, and how he was born and all that. So we'll try to give the meaning of Christmas behind what we're doing. But definitely the emphasis is probably for our family is definitely the kids are looking at presents.

Christin Thieme: Oh yeah. Think that's every family, right?

Jennifer Masango: Yeah.

Emmanuel Masango: Oh yes.

Christin Thieme: So you are obviously deeply involved in The Salvation Army. So what do you love about The Salvation Army most at Christmastime?

Emmanuel Masango: Well, you realize I say a lot of lists. So for me, two things. The first thing is just the opportunity we have to serve our communities. Part of our mission is about preaching the good news and meeting human needs. So for me, we're able to live out both parts of that mission statement. We're telling people about Jesus, but we're also doing this practical thing that we offer food for families in need, toys for families that may not have anything to give to their kids. So for me, that's the first thing, just the opportunity to live out our mission. And secondly, just coming into contact with people that maybe we don't get to see the rest of the year, depending on what our ministry looks like locally. The Christmas season just opens it up to a wider group of people that we can have an impact on.

Christin Thieme: Yeah, definitely.

Jennifer Masango: One thing I was going to say that I love most about Christmas in The Salvation Army is I love bell ringers. There's just something about having... A lot of them will come to the corps in the morning. We get to do devotions with them, we get to walk beside them in life and in their challenges. We've had some of them that came to us crying, saying, "I don't know what to do. I just lost a family member," or whatever. Just the opportunity that we have to walk beside people.

Christin Thieme: Yeah, absolutely. As officers, or pastors, in The Salvation Army, you've had all of these different types of Salvation Army Christmas experiences, from kettles to the Christmas programs to organizing meals and toys and on and on and on, all the different aspects of what The Salvation Army does in communities each year at Christmastime. I wonder, do you have one story that really stands out to you from across all of those experiences that you could tell us?

Emmanuel Masango: Well, lots of stories, but one that always touches my heart is our very first appointment, I happened to be around that 2008, 2009 recession. We would always have this large group of volunteers come from Intel. We would have two or three groups of 50 come and volunteer, help the families shop for toys and food, and help them to their car.

I remember this one year where this lady started going through the line as a client, and she started crying. And so I just happened to be standing close by, and I went over to see what was going on. She just said, "Hey, last year I was with that group here, volunteering, helping families, but this year I'm here receiving assistance." Unfortunately, her and her husband worked in the same department that was no longer there, and so of a sudden their twin 11-year-old boys that were in need. And so she just had this overwhelming sense of maybe embarrassment that some of her coworkers were walking through the line with her. So I ended up being able to walk with her and talk with her and comfort her, and she was so, so grateful.

Sometimes when we come to this season, we ask, "How did they end up here?" Or we wonder if it's just people not being responsible, but there's just so many different stories of people going through different struggles that bring them to our doors, and we have this amazing opportunity to be able to help them.

Jennifer Masango: And it was so touching. She even had her face covered by her hood because she was too embarrassed for anybody to see her. And she said, "I can't go through this line. This is too much." And so Emmanuel had the opportunity to walk her through the line. We were almost all crying. It was just really touching.

Christin Thieme: Yeah, and a good reminder that it can happen to anybody, really. That's incredible. It's a busy season and a lot going on, especially in The Salvation Army. So why do we recognize this season of Advent, specifically?

Emmanuel Masango: I think for me, Advent is a great reminder. I think we always hear the phrase, "the reason for the season," that Jesus is the reason for the season. And Advent simply means the appearing so we'll look back to Jesus coming to Earth. As we read the story of the birth of Jesus, for example, through Luke, like Jennifer said earlier, we're really reading this story about God stepping into time, and being able to slow down and pause and deliberately look at that.

I know the busyness of the work, the ministry, the service sometimes almost drowns out all of those things, but I love the opportunity to just kind of slow things down and really look at, Jesus came to Earth, and he came to save us, and all of us can get into this life-changing relationship with him. So love the gifts, love the parties, like I said earlier, but to just really pause and be meaningful about it all, to say, "This is about God who loved us so much to send his Son to Earth."

Christin Thieme: As parents yourselves and pastors who are deeply involved in youth ministry in The Salvation Army, is there any different way you would explain what Advent is to kids?

Emmanuel Masango: I don't know. Even with adults, I like to keep it simple, because sometimes I feel like we complicate a story. Even though it's very deep, we could really share it in very simple ways. Even when we talk about gifts, our kids expect gifts under a tree because we love them, they're our children. So if we could take that same concept and say, "Hey, we have a God who is like a father who loves us so much and gave us this gift in Christ Jesus."

We don't have to be good all year for God to love us. We could have made all these bad choices, but God still loves us and gave us this gift. And so we could really, for me, use very simple terms to explain a very deep story, meaningful story. And I think even if adults, sometimes we assume people have some kind of church experience or Bible experience, but there's probably a lot of people who don't. And so keeping it simple for me actually really can go further.

Christin Thieme: What have you seen work to help make it a meaningful season for families? A lot of what you're saying is really just that intentionality, it sounds like, of actually remembering to talk about it, to make sure people are aware. What have you seen work in all of your experience that helps to really increase that meaningfulness for families?

Jennifer Masango: I would say, like you said, intentionality. It doesn't have to be a 30 minute lesson with your kids. It can be a five minute, "Hey, let's take a moment, and let's pause and see what the Bible says about Jesus's coming and how that can affect our lives." So I've seen a lot of people, maybe at dinnertime they'll have questions they ask, or maybe right before bed they'll kind of do a little thing around the tree in the living room. I usually just tell people it's about doing something. In the midst of the busyness, we complicate things. Sometimes just keeping it simple. And take that time aside and make it count. Maybe it's when you're having some hot chocolate every night or some kind of dessert.

Christin Thieme: Yeah, kind of whatever works for you and making it work.

Jennifer Masango: Yeah, exactly.

Christin Thieme: Well, on that note, we have a new resource actually from The Salvation Army this year that is, like you said, "Keep it simple." It's one of those classic Advent paper chains that all kids love that invites families into a simple rhythm, focusing on the love we receive and share at Christmas. I know that you've seen this resource. What do you love most about it for families?

Jennifer Masango: Can I just say I really love it. I love that it's visual. For me, if I get a booklet, that booklet gets put aside, maybe it's not as a good reminder. But having a chain maybe where we're going to designate as a place. Maybe it's by the table or somewhere that we can visually see.

Christin Thieme: Yeah, and part of the decor.

Jennifer Masango: Yeah, it's part of the decor, and everyone gets to participate. For the younger kids especially, they can color it. Everyone can be involved. It's easy to use. It's downloadable. I think for many families, that's key. Make it simple. Get the information out there so people can participate.

Emmanuel Masango: Yeah, and the kids can get involved, so it's not just Mom and Dad doing it all. You could say, "Hey, you got this part you could read today," and the other might color. They might do the cutout, help hang it. It's amazing, when we give kids simple tasks, that really helps them get more involved. So I really love that kids can jump in as well.

Jennifer Masango: Yeah, and even the three prompts. There's a verse to read, a moment to reflect, and then a gearing of how to pray. It's simple. It makes it really easy. And I like that. Also, for me, I was thinking at first when I looked at the material, I was thinking the chain... I was like, "Oh, it's kind of sad you have to rip it down because after a while it just becomes like three hanging..."

But I like the idea where you can even move something along like a clothes pin, so you can keep your decoration up but kind of know where we're at. I know for my kids, they're fighting over moving... I think we have this little board that you move the thing over every day, and my kids are like, "It's my turn." We wound up getting three of them because it was too much of a fight every morning. "Did you already move it? It was my turn." Oh my gosh.

Christin Thieme: Yeah. It's a countdown. It's super fun, right?

Jennifer Masango: Yeah.

Emmanuel Masango: Yes.

Jennifer Masango: They'll even move it over just to move it back themselves. Now they're older, it's not as big of a deal, but I think it's the one that everyone can get involved in. And if you have multiple kids, you could even print off a few and everyone could have their own chain.

Christin Thieme: Yeah, that's what I'm going to do at my house, because like you said, it'll be a problem. This way everyone can color their own, can have it up in their own rooms and have that little... That's what I love about it. It's just a moment reminder that's visual, like you said, to have that little daily moment with your family, almost a regroup time to focus on love in such a busy season.

And each week actually has a focus around love. Week One is We Love God. Week Two, We Love our Neighbors. Three, We Love Our City, and Four, We Love Our World.

We've seen a lot of ads at this time of year as well from The Salvation Army focusing on this idea of Love Beyond. Why do you guys think that love is a fitting theme for this season?

Emmanuel Masango: Well, I think for me, love encompasses everything that God has done for us. One of those verses that a lot of people know, John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son." So love gives love is not just a feeling, it's a decision that results in an action. I think love is very applicable because we're talking about the love of God. But when you think about the social services The Salvation Army does is also an expression of our love for our communities. We're not just saying, "Hey, we love you. I hope you have a good season." We're saying, "We love you, and if you need help, here's some practical assistance with food or toys or a holiday meal." I just love the theme of love. And I think a lot of people can relate to that, whether they're people of faith or not. The word love is something they would have a basic understanding of.

Jennifer Masango: Yeah, when you picture too, right now, you look on the news, it's a bit discouraging and frustrating. A lot of hate, a lot of war. But what can we do on our part? We can love. And we can encourage each other to love one another as well.

Christin Thieme: So we talked about the intentionality. We have this new resource, which I should mention is free for anybody at caringmagazine.org/advent, can download that resource, print it out, create your own paper chain. But last question for you both. How would you encourage parents especially to make this a more meaningful season with their family? What's your best piece of advice on how to do that this year?

Emmanuel Masango: For me, I would say if you live by a calendar, put it on the calendar. For our house, for example, the last few years Jennifer tries to get, "This is the one fun thing we're going to do this week." So mapping it out, one big thing we're going to do every week so that we're intentional with actually engaging our kids, especially because we're so busy with work, we almost overlook our own kids.

So we intentionally add these different fun activities, making cookies or go see Christmas lights. We could add this idea of sitting down every night, maybe before bed or during dinnertime, to work on our Advent chain here. So just think we're going to plan it out, because we plan out everything else. So if we plan it into our schedule, I think we have a better chance of actually accomplishing it.

Christin Thieme: Yeah. Well, thank you both, Majors Masango, for joining us and sharing a little bit about your Christmas and what we have coming up this year. Thank you.

Jennifer Masango: Thank you so much.

Emmanuel Masango: Thank you for having us. Have a great holiday season.

Additional resources:

- Join us this season to center your heart—and your children's hearts—on the meaning of the season, the gift of love, given and received at Christmas. [Simply sign up with your email](#) to receive the free downloadable PDF right in your inbox today.

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