

★ The Herring Herald ★

Volume 15

December 2017

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Sea Lions and Iguanas and Boobies, Oh My!

2017 overflowed with family travel. In May, Mark and I took a short jaunt to Chicago to celebrate our anniversary and had a fabulous time walking our old town and taking in a showing of Hamilton. A month later, the boys headed to West Virginia for a weeklong mission trip building houses while Ellie and I took off to Las Vegas to join Mark on a show for a few days. While Vegas certainly isn't the most fitting place to take your 10 year old daughter, as long as she kept the blinders, ear muffs and nose plug on we were just fine.

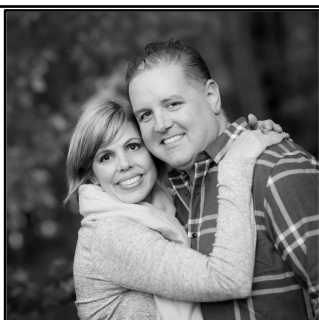
In July, I jumped on a plane for an amazing girls trip to Sedona, Arizona. We indulged at a top-notch spa, gambled with our lives in a harrowing jeep ride, hiked Devil's Bridge, visited the Grand Canyon and generally soaked up as much fun and fellowship as we possibly could.

While we certainly had our share of adventures this year, without a doubt the biggest one was a 2-week trip to Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands this summer. After months of planning, we embarked on the trip of a lifetime. We spent the vast majority of our time island hopping between Santa Cruz, Isabela and San Cristobal and lived every dream we could possibly imagine from diving with hammerheads at Kicker Rock to snorkeling in Isla Lobos with the world's friendliest sea lions. The local residents, namely the giant tortoises, marine iguanas, blue-footed boobies and sea lions, were welcoming and unforgettable. It was everything we hoped it would be and more. The only thing that could have made it better was if we had been able to smuggle a baby sea lion home in our suitcase. Sadly, that's frowned upon in the Galapagos.



The Silver Years

Mark continues to grow his business and relishes the opportunities to meld creativity and production. He also volunteers on the production team at our church and serves as Vice President for the high school's band booster association. In between all of that, Mark still



finds time to be chief fixer, school lunch guy, fish caretaker, grill master and all around awesome dad and husband.

I'm still busying myself with a variety of commitments (some may argue they're over commitments but I really am cutting back - I promise). I am in my 6th year of being a Girl Scout leader, my 2nd year as art director for the play and also my 2nd year as assistant treasurer for the band. In my spare moments I continue to write although it's never as often as I'd like.

Looking forward to celebrating 20 years of marriage this May, Mark and I are also preparing to send our first born off to college in the next year. Faced with such impending change, many couples rebel and attempt to turn back the clock. They buy fancy cars, take expensive trips and adopt daring new past times. We have decided to take a different approach. Instead of fancy cars, we have purchased two fancy armchairs and some reading glasses. Instead of expensive trips, we frequent Costco, Target and Home Depot. And instead of daring new hobbies, we work on backyard architectural designs over glasses of wine and whiskey. No doubt about it. We are livin' the dream!

How Did This Happen?!

Josh is now a senior in high school and a legal adult. He celebrated turning 18 by driving to the store after midnight to buy cigarettes and lottery tickets (kidding of course). In all seriousness, Josh continues to amaze us with his success in just about everything he does. After a grueling junior year he decided to take things a little lighter this year, which allowed time for him to work on college applications. He applied to three schools and is now waiting for decisions. The waiting is a bit stressful, but we are confident he will end up where he should and completely trust God's perfect plan for him.

By night (or early morning), Josh is Vice President of the senior class, a leader in FCA and a highly sought-after math tutor. Additionally, he is finishing up his third year of being a middle school leader at our church. Just writing about everything he does is exhausting. It's no wonder he sleeps till 1pm on his days off!

Most of Josh's free time is spent on 3 things: math, more math and escape rooms. Earlier this year we installed a 3'x 5' white board in his room to record his frequent mathematical epiphanies. While I'm certain his markings are symbols of genius, I have no idea what it all means. When he's not doing math, Josh and his friends are also approaching professional status at local escape rooms. So far, their list of accomplishments includes saving the world by finding a critical antidote, apprenticing with a world-renowned magician and outsmarting a wanted jewel thief. Quite honestly, Josh was made for escape rooms. Over Thanksgiving, our family did one and Josh figured out early on that one of the required combinations was in Morse code, which, of course, he knows by heart.



"DJ Enzyme" - Breaking it Down

Halfway through his sophomore year in high school, Nathan has had two great passions at school this year: band and film. He participated in marching band again and, to his delight, the director opted to march trombones, which allowed Nathan to go back to his original instrument (previously trombone players had to switch to the baritone for marching). He loves the music and instruments but most of all he loves the community. Nathan has actually developed a substantial following within the band as "DJ Enzyme", his alter ego. With a diverse musical taste rivaled only by Mark, he frequently creates killer playlists and leads kids around the band room with a speaker on his shoulder. He's open to taking requests but only if he deems the song worthy.

When Nathan doesn't have an instrument in his hand, he is sitting at a computer perfecting special effects for any number of video projects. He was one of only 3 freshman last year to be selected for "The Buzz" news team and every week he gets to plan, shoot and edit a segment for the school's news show. While he's always been exceptionally creative, watching his ideas come to life each week is amazing.

In general, Nathan is just plain happy and one of the best byproducts

of this is the expansion of his comedy antics. Nathan can make us laugh like no one else and takes his job very seriously. Recently, he has become a master of accents and he uses them proficiently and prolifically. It adds a hilarious aspect to every day routine in our house, as it's not uncommon to hear in-depth commentary by an Aussie bloke or witty interjections by a Russian general.



Animals are My Life

Now 11 years old, Ellie is in the 5th grade and wrapping up her elementary school career. She is an excellent student and excels in every subject although, like all Herring kids, math and science are definitely her favorites. She continues to pursue drama and loved being a fairy last February in our school's production of Peter Pan. Next year she will take the stage again as Madame de la Grande Bouche, the singing wardrobe, in Beauty and the Beast.



Ellie continues to be the frosting on our Herring cake. Her heart is tender and soft and that is what we are most proud of. Kindness seems to be harder and harder to find these days but seeing her sweet spirit and the depth of her love for others helps restore my faith every day.

Truth be told, Ellie's real hobby and passion is stuffed animal hoarding. While on the outside her room appears tidy and organized, just below the surface lurks an extensive network of storage filled with dozens and dozens of furry friends. Nathan is convinced she has one of every species although it's more likely 2 or 3 of every species since each "guy" needs to have a buddy. Heaven for bid that Dumpling the bear or Peanut the elephant should ever feel alone in this world. We've tried pairing down with little success. She knows each stuffed animal by name as well as their entire backstory including how she obtained them and whom they prefer to hang out with. While storage is becoming a daunting obstacle, there are certainly far worse obsessions an 11-year-old girl could have. I'm just hoping stuffed animal hoarding isn't the gateway drug that leads to her becoming the crazy cat lady later in life.

The Three Stooges...and Gill

It's been a banner pet year here at the Herrings. As if in some kind of alternate reality, we successfully started and ended the year with the same 4 pets. Gill the fish is enjoying a solitary existence in his souped up tank and relishes the fact that his day-to-day life is generally predictable and safe. Well, except for the days when he wakes to find a baby lion staring in on him with a hungry look on her face.

Luna, Milo and Pumpkin have become great frenemies and keep us entertained daily with their antics. While the dogs and cat generally get along, occasionally Milo and Luna realize Pumpkin is actually a cat and chaos quickly ensues. After about 10 minutes of frantic barking and chasing, they settle back into the disturbing reality that they are, in fact, family. Once the fun is over, Milo and Luna quickly return their attention to their first love, the tennis ball.

The Gift

While Nathan had an exceptional year in most areas, his academics gave him a run for his money. Six weeks into the semester we discovered he was underwater in 3 of his classes with little motivation to swim out. So we promised a reward if he just brought his grades up. Meet the condition and you get the gift.

Over two millennia ago, God also promised a gift. For centuries, He assured Israel that there would be salvation. A king was coming and He would be for all the people. But this gift had no condition. No strings, no contingencies, no cancellations or take-backs. However, as years passed, Israel gave Him every reason to rescind the offer. Centuries of rebellion and hard-heartedness would've caused any sane person to call it quits. Thankfully, God doesn't operate by human standards. While as flawed humans we give gifts in spite of disobedience and brokenness, God gave the greatest gift because of our brokenness. Looking at our world today it would be tempting to call the whole thing off. Instead, He holds fast to His promise. He stands before us holding nothing back, including His Son. Especially His Son.

On a silent night in a small Judean town, God offered a gift in the form of His son, Jesus. The wrapping was meager and the unwrapping would take His lifetime but it was a gift without condition or negotiation. It is a gift for all the people. No matter how filthy, how broken, how wretched we are. This Christmas, stand in awe before the gift. Rest humbly in the promise that so graciously has nothing to do with what we do but everything to do with the extravagance of His love for us.