This past Christmas season was an experience of hosting or visiting for us. Stacey’s parents joined us just before Christmas, then my parents traveled to see us after Christmas. There were even a few days of overlap when we had a house full of grandparents.

Then, my parents were stuck with us for another day or two after their planned departure—a giant winter storm delayed their travel. In the middle of all of that, Stacey and I made a trip to New York to visit a friend for a few days; her parents stayed back with the kids. So, it was a season of traveling in one form or another, and it all went as well as it possibly could have gone. December and January were full of stories, laughing, good food, and playfulness.

When we came upon the feast of the Epiphany (January 5 this year), I was ripe for reflection upon journeys. The three wise men traveled long distances to visit the Holy Family, and they brought gifts to honor the Christ child. They invested themselves in this person, Jesus—they picked up and mobilized their lives to encounter him. The traveling and hosting that we experienced during Christmas was much like this—people picked up their lives and journeyed long distances to encounter one another, and to honor each other with gifts.

The story of the three wise men indicates that they were overjoyed to reach their destination and to find Jesus and his mother and father. After such a long journey, after such searching, their encounter did not disappoint. They had read and studied about this child, but it made a difference to be able to see and touch him, to speak with his parents and to understand what his life was like. They left feeling like their journey was worth the effort—their encounter changed the way they understood everything about Jesus.

Stacey and I got the kids out for an hour of sledding after all our house guests were gone—just the five of us—and we realized that it was the first time our family had been just our family for weeks. We were grateful to settle back into a normal routine again soon. But the time together with people who are most important to us had been well worth it. Sharing life together, even for a few days, changes the way we understand those relationships. Like the three wise men, we’ve also been overjoyed at the encounters that the season had brought us.

We stay in touch with people who are important to us using all of the modern means of communication, but even live video chats can’t replace spending time with each other in person.

Nothing replaces shaking hands, standing or sitting next to each other, or a warm hug from a loved one—we give and receive love with our bodies. The three wise men were among the first to encounter and appreciate this characteristic in God as well—out of love, God has joined our bodily condition.

What a gift it is for the love among family and friends to be an experience of embodied love, and for this experience of love to be a participation in God.