

It's that time of year when our hearts reach out to family and friends who we love—quickened by the story of a birth in Bethlehem, of God reaching out to us in costly, wondrous love.

A birth is the main news of our family here in VA in 2021. Karen & I heard this news the last day of a four week vacation that involved traveling to visit both of my brothers (in PA and NY) and both of Karen's siblings in the East (in OH and IL) and also



spending time tent-camping in state or national parks (in PA, IN, and VA). What a delightful, relaxing month. We enjoyed each other, family,

nature, books (I read 3 aloud to Karen), country roads (we would sometimes use GoogleMap to plot our course on narrow little-used roads), and the fun challenge of camping—you meet such nice people doing that. (Good character, low-maintenance types camp. Ahem.)

Our last tenting spot, the last 3 days of our vacation, was quite primitive—no showers, no cell service, large sites, lots of wildlife (a neighbor took a video of a young bear walking by our car and I took a picture of a rattlesnake by our site). After packing up and heading home, as we got closer to civilization, our cell phones began to ding as texts downloaded. Lo and behold, that morning our 6th grand-child, 2nd grand-daughter, Sylvia Mae Smeltzer-Miller, had made her entrance into our world (9 days early)—and into our hearts. She's over 4 mos old now; her big eyes take in everything—watching an older cousin fascinates her for hours. Karen babysits her one day a week, and also has Oscar, April & Scott's 3 yr old, 3 days a week. There's nothing she would rather be doing!



In May Karen joined me in the wonder of Medicare (no more \$6000 deductibles!) Thankfully we stayed healthy Covid-wise through the madness of the pandemic which keeps stretching on. We and our family are vaccinated (even the 2 first-graders) and boosted, so we enjoyed a Thanksgiving indoors; many Sunday dinners also. Much to be thankful for, including all of us getting much joy and satisfaction from jobs we've had for a while.

In addition to her baby-sitting Karen canned produce and fruit until she ran out of canning jars. She enjoys being able to participate in Bible Study Fellowship in person again. And has sat with Rachel in several craft fairs this Fall. I'm enjoying teaching a foundations class during Sunday School to 7 sharp youth who are unbaptized; I get to cover what I'm most excited about in our faith (basically, reasons I delight to follow Jesus, and things that help us follow Jesus). Next year is Trissels' bicentennial (we're the oldest Mennonite congregation in VA); we have something planned each month from May through October.

