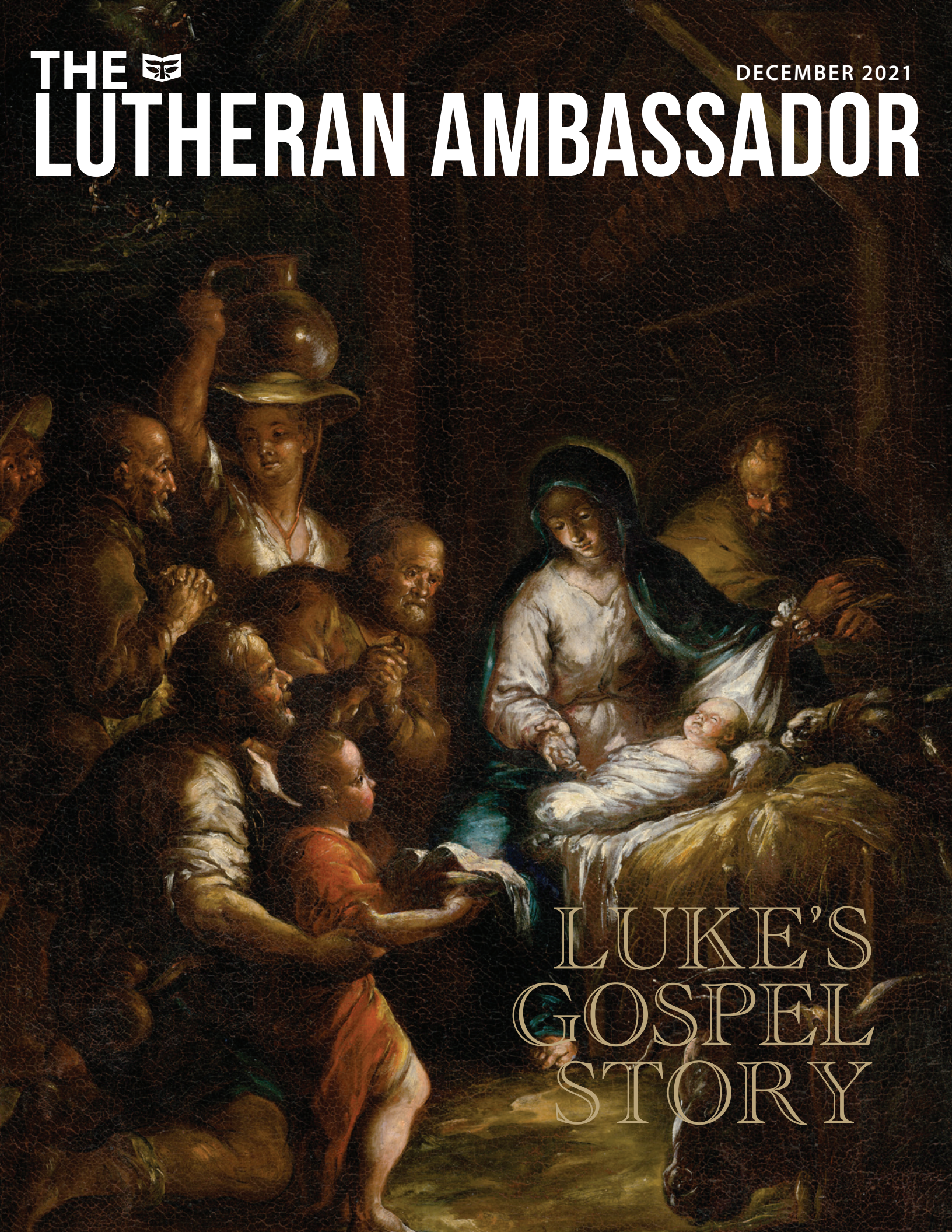


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LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR



LUKE'S
GOSPEL
STORY



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ENCOURAGING WORD

REMEMBER WHO HE IS

BY RACHEL MATTSON

Every year during the Advent season I am struck again by the wonder of Jesus coming to earth. But it also makes me wonder what it would have been like to be one of the

people living during that time, especially Mary.

What excitement and wonder would have filled her heart as the angel appeared to her telling of the Savior and King to come! In that moment, she hears of the grandeur of who Jesus is.

Luke 1:32-33 says, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end."

What an announcement! And what a response from this young girl, "May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38).

However, being a forgetful human myself, I begin to wonder how long the excitement and acceptance of this news lasted. When Jesus was born and lay as a helpless baby in her arms, did she wonder how this could ever be the Son of the Most High? As He grew into a toddler, did she ever feel exhausted and question whether He would one day sit on the throne? As she watched Him die on the cross, did she doubt the angel's words that this child would reign forever and ever? Did it ever seem hopeless to her?

In the exciting and comfortable times in our lives, I think it's easier to accept God's words of His power, authority, and sovereignty. But what happens to us when things don't go the way that

we planned? When life takes a different direction, and we are stuck with hard and exhausting times. Do we ponder the words of Scripture in our hearts and remember the promises that are found in them?

Remember that He is God our Savior, who is mindful of the lowly, who is mighty and does great things, holy in all He does, extending His mercy to all who fear Him, performing mighty deeds with His strong arm, scattering the proud and bringing down rulers, lifting the humble, and filling the hungry with good things (Luke 1:47-53). Do we remember that He is the Son of the Most High who will reign forever?

Jesus our Savior is always orchestrating His plans in the midst of all of the events of this world. He is always in control and will accomplish His wonders. He has spoken to us through His Word, which will always be true. No matter what events, trials, wonders, or human feelings you are facing, remind yourself of the promises of Jesus. He will reign forever and ever because nothing is impossible for our Almighty God.

"Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You" (II Chronicles 20:6).

Mattson is a member of Our Saviour's Lutheran, Thief River Falls, Minn. "The Birth of Christ," by anonymous artist after Anibale Carracci, 1580-1620. Cover image: "The Birth," by Franz Xaver Wagenschön, 1760-1770.

For me You were born. Therefore, whatever heavenly
goods You bring with You in Your birth will be mine.
—Johann Gerhard

The central miracle asserted by Christianity is the
Incarnation.
—C.S. Lewis

Come, Jesus, glorious heavenly guest, Keep thine
own Christmas in our breast.
—N.F.S. Grundtvig

[All praise to Thee, eternal Lord, clothed in a garb of flesh and blood; Choosing
a manger for Thy throne, while worlds on worlds are Thine alone.
—Martin Luther]

My heart remains in wonder before that lowly bed
within the stable yonder where Christ my Lord was
laid.
—H.A. Brorson

My friend, there was nothing festive about being
born in a manger and dying on a cross.
—Ole Hallesby

LUKE'S GOSPEL TAG

BY LARRY J. WALKER

There's a tradition about how Luke came to write his Gospel. I like it, and it seems to me to fit the Bible narrative. The tradition says that Luke did a lot of research while staying in Caesarea, during the two years the apostle Paul was under house arrest there, awaiting trial.

That must have been a frustrating period for the missionaries. They found work to do while they waited, but they must have thought again and again, "This wasn't what I was called to do!"

But Luke (according to this tradition) made the most of it. One thing he seems to have done then was to write the Book of Acts, which can be seen as a kind of "legal deposition" for Paul's trial in Rome (the account starts in Acts 23).

But there were also many people available in that area who'd been eyewitnesses to the life and work of our Lord Jesus. Chief among them was Mary, the Lord's mother. That would explain the details of the Savior's birth, seen from Mary's point of view, that we find only in Luke's Gospel. How eager she must have been to share her stories, and how eagerly Luke must have written them down!

It's been called—with good reason—the greatest story ever told. But Luke, a physician, a man of science in his time, knew the principle that "if it sounds too good to be true, it's probably not."

So, he adds this preface to his book. Essentially, he's saying, "Look, Theophilus (the name means 'Beloved of God'), you're about to read about some amazing things. Wonderful things. Things so astounding you'll find them hard to believe.

"But I fact-checked it. This isn't some myth about the gods on Olympus. It's not an ancient tale about a legendary golden age. This is an account of things that happened in our lifetimes, and there are multiple witnesses still around to testify to them. I talked to those people.

"The world isn't what you think it is. Life isn't what you think it is. Something amazing is happening all around us, and you can be part of it. I'm going to tell you about these astounding things. Angels. Miracles. Sicknesses healed. The dead raised. Hope for everyone who's abused or oppressed or suffering.

"I'm going to start with the stories of a couple of babies ..."

I'm sure there are wonderful customs among the many cultures who celebrate Christmas in warm southern climates (Christ wasn't exactly born in Norway, after all). But I've always been grateful personally to know Christmas as a time of light in darkness, a celebration carried on bravely just at that time of year when the darkness seems most powerful. Christmas is, and always should be, a kind of surprise.

G. K. Chesterton wrote it this way in his poem, "The House of Christmas:"

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.

"Gospel," as I'm sure you know, means "good news." Like so many things about our faith, we need to look at it a second time. This isn't just any good news—it's the *best* news. The best news possible. We are not alone. We are not forgotten. We are loved in a greater and stranger way than we ever imagined. Death has been conquered. The future will be incredible. Everything you've suffered will be worth it. Whatever you've dreamed of, whatever you've fantasized about—it will be better than that.

Luke 1:1-4 is like a gift tag on a Christmas present. On the tag is written, "You're about to open a gift so wonderful you'll have a hard time believing it's for you. Trust me, it is. Open it now. Merry Christmas, Beloved of God."

Walker is the former librarian for AFLC Schools and editor of The Sverdrup Journal. He is a member of Hope Lutheran Church, North Minneapolis, and is a published novelist and Norwegian translator. "Evangelist Luke," anonymous, 1671-1673.



INASMUCH AS MANY HAVE
UNDERTAKEN TO COMPILE A
NARRATIVE OF THE THINGS THAT
HAVE BEEN ACCOMPLISHED AMONG
US, JUST AS THOSE WHO FROM THE
BEGINNING WERE EYEWITNESSES
AND MINISTERS OF THE WORD
HAVE DELIVERED THEM TO US, IT
SEEMED GOOD TO ME ALSO, HAVING
FOLLOWED ALL THINGS CLOSELY
FOR SOME TIME PAST, TO WRITE AN
ORDERLY ACCOUNT FOR YOU, MOST
EXCELLENT THEOPHILUS, THAT YOU
MAY HAVE CERTAINTY CONCERNING
THE THINGS YOU HAVE BEEN TAUGHT.

LUKE 1:1-4



ZECHARIAH'S MIRACLE

BY CODY M. QUANBECK



MANY NIGHTS WE'VE PRAYED
WITH NO PROOF ANYONE COULD HEAR.
ALL AT ONCE AN ANSWER CAME
IN WAYS WE NEVER PLANNED.
SO WE ARE NOT AFRAID
FOR WE'VE SEEN MIRACLES APPEAR.

A lyric from the original animated film *The Prince of Egypt* haunts me in a good way. The scene: The children of Israel are trapped between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army. No pillar of cloud has moved to protect them, and no waters have yet parted. In the middle of this scene of panic, someone sings, “Many nights we’ve prayed / With no proof anyone could hear. / All at once an answer came / In ways we never planned.”

Zechariah and Elizabeth could relate. “Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.” You’d think that if anyone deserved to have their prayers granted, it would be these two. “But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years” (Luke 1:5-7). Zechariah had apparently become completely resigned to being fatherless by the time an angel told him that he would have a son and not just any son. “He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah ...” (Luke 1:15-17). Rather than immediately praising God, Zechariah responded by asking, “How can I be sure of this?” (Luke 1:18).

Perhaps at that point in his life, after so many years of fruitless wishing, the news sounded too good to be true. We may well be inclined to condemn Zechariah for questioning the Lord’s timing. But we’re probably just as likely to secretly (or not so secretly) agree with him and question why God didn’t send John the Baptist and his famous cousin sooner. It’s not like the world didn’t need them before.

Fortunately, after being punished with muteness for a time, Zechariah gratefully accepted God’s gift. “You, my child,” he prophesied to his son, “will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins ...” (Luke 1: 76-77).

John the Baptist could also be said to have “prepared the way” for Jesus because the account of his birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth mirrors Christ’s incarnation. The world had been crying

out for a Savior, without necessarily knowing that was what it was doing, ever since it needed one. And when He came, it was in a way even more unpredictable than a son being born to a barren woman, which had some precedent in the Old Testament. It was by a son being born to a virgin! Stories about virgin births aren’t unheard of in mythology, of course. But what pious Jew would expect God to do something similar to a pagan myth? How many of their ancestors expected the plagues of Egypt, the parting of the sea, or manna from Heaven? Many couldn’t believe it had really happened that way. Many still can’t.

And to the pragmatic mind, Jesus was hardly the most useful Savior, one who didn’t overthrow tyrannical governments or improve any laws. (Did Zechariah and Elizabeth ever find it inconvenient to have a child in their old age?) Any cultural benefits from Christ’s teachings would occur well into the future. While He was on Earth, some miraculous healings were the most people received. But some of those He healed received something else, something they may not have comprehended until after their deaths, the thing Zechariah mentions in his song: the forgiveness of their sins.

Looking back today, Christians envy the disappointed and cynical people who saw Christ in the flesh. Now we’re in the same boat as the people before them, waiting for the Messiah. It’s been so long since Jesus ascended into Heaven and it’s hard to believe He’ll ever return, especially for Christians in countries where Christianity is unwelcome. Like Israel waiting for the Lord’s anointed, like Zechariah and Elizabeth wishing for a child, we long for it. But can we reasonably expect to see it in our lifetime? Reading about John the Baptist’s birth can give us hope. There’s a difference between unexpected and impossible.

By the way, there’s more to those lyrics I quoted. “Many nights we’ve prayed / With no proof anyone could hear. / All at once an answer came / In ways we never planned. So we are not afraid / For we’ve seen miracles appear ...”

Quanbeck is a member of New Luther Valley Lutheran, McVie, N.D.

FINDING FAVOR

BY PASTOR SETH MOAN

When was the last time you let someone down? How did it feel to leave a friend or family member disappointed? Moments like these can cause us to believe that we owe a great debt because of our failures. As a result, we often respond by seeking to make up for these shortcomings. We attempt to do whatever it takes to regain our good standing with those we love. Our tendency is to seek their approval—their favor—by our own valiant efforts.

Unfortunately, this same mindset can too easily carry over into our relationship with God. Whether consciously or not, there are times when we begin to base our standing with God on our “Christian” behavior. When we share that last piece of lefse at our family Christmas gathering, or when we give above and beyond our 10-percent tithe, we may begin to believe that God must be incredibly proud of us. On the other hand, when we fall into sin and fail to keep His commands, we may feel the urge to make amends for our failures to get back on God’s “good side.” We attempt to earn God’s favor by our good deeds.

In Luke 1:26-38, we read the account of the angel Gabriel’s announcement to the virgin Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus, the promised Messiah. In verse 28, Gabriel says to her, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” Similarly, in verse 30, he reassures young Mary with these words: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” In the midst of receiving such a shocking message, the assurance that Mary had found favor with God must have come as a welcome word of comfort. Still, this announcement from the angel Gabriel may cause us to ponder the question, “Why did Mary find favor with God?”

Throughout the history of the church, some have sought to answer this question by claiming that Mary was without sin. This viewpoint implies that her favor with God and His choice of her to be the mother of Jesus was essentially deserved. Interestingly, however, the term *favor* in this passage comes from the Greek word *χάρις* (*charis*) which is most frequently translated as *grace*. Grace, of course, has nothing to do with

what a person deserves. Instead, the grace of God is His unmerited favor toward us. For Mary, this gracious choice of God was not the result of her worthiness. Rather, it was the undeserved favor of God which was hers by faith in the promises of His Word.

In verse 38, Mary’s response of humble submission to God’s plan provides a clear demonstration of her faith: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Although God’s choice of Mary and His plan to use her in bringing the Savior into the world may not have made sense to her, she trusted that God knew what He was doing and that He would be with her despite the foreseeable hardships that lay ahead.

Perhaps you can recall times in your own life when you were trying to find favor with God on the merit of your own efforts. Perhaps you have fallen into the trap of believing that your failures are too many for God to forgive. The truth is that none of us can earn or will ever deserve God’s favor and the grace that He has shown us. Instead, it is all a gift that is received through faith in Christ—faith in the promised child who was purposefully given the name Jesus (meaning “Yahweh is salvation”). He is the One through whom our God would make salvation available to all people. He is the One who would save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

As we marvel at the gift of grace which we receive by faith, we are reminded that God’s plan and His purposes are always good. We are set free to confidently pursue the calling that God has given to us. We are assured of His presence with us no matter what we may face, and together with Mary, we can respond with a song of praise: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47). Trust in the Savior who came for you, died for you, and rose again for you. It is by faith in Him alone that your favor with God is found.

Moan is the associate pastor of Emmanuel Free Lutheran, Williston, N.D. “The Annunciation,” by follower of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, 1700-1800.

GREETINGS, O FAVORED ONE,
THE LORD IS WITH YOU! ...
DO NOT BE AFRAID
FOR YOU HAVE FOUND
FAVOR WITH GOD.






LUKE 1:39-56

UNEXPECTED MOTHERS

BY SHANNON
MCNEAR



uke records the meeting of two miraculously expectant mothers (1:39-56)—one barely of age and although engaged to be married, informed that she's to become mother to the Messiah, conceived by the Holy Spirit and not her fiancé or any other man; and one past childbearing years, six months along with her very first child, like Sarah of old, after decades of barrenness.

Doubtless still trembling from her encounter with the angel, Mary must face her parents and betrothed with her news. Does she tell them right away? Maybe she hesitates—after all, who will believe her? If anyone, she realizes it would be her elderly cousin who, according to the angel, is also carrying a child under impossible circumstances. And so off she goes to visit Elizabeth.

As it turned out, Mary didn't even need to tell Elizabeth. When Mary walked into the house and called out a greeting, Elizabeth's baby—the unborn John the Baptist—gave a flurry of movement inside her. Elizabeth herself shrieks and breaks out into a Holy-Spirit-inspired benediction. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

In essence she is saying, "Who am I that the mother of our Messiah should visit me?" How astounding that the unborn prophet recognizes the presence of his unborn Savior—but no less astounding that his mother also recognizes the mother of Jesus for her favored position.

What follows from Mary's lips is nothing less than a Psalm. No surprise, really, considering the Spirit who inspired David and others is the same One who kindled that Divine Light inside Mary:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my
spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of
his servant. For behold, from now on all
generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things
for me, and holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the
thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their
thrones and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham
and to his offspring forever. (vs. 46-55)

Much has been written of the Spirit-inspired poetry flowing from both Elizabeth and Mary, but it's the rather spare narrative framing it, the possible drama behind the scenes, which seizes my imagination. We don't know, for instance, whether Elizabeth told anyone of her pregnancy before this. Some speculate that this was the first time Elizabeth felt her baby move, which I find unlikely. On the other hand, why would the angel have needed to mention it to Mary? We also don't know, as already noted, whether Mary broke her own news to her parents and Joseph before the visit, or if she simply asked permission to go be with Elizabeth on some pretext of offering comfort and assistance to an elderly relative of uncertain health. And did she realize that the angel who appeared to her was Gabriel, the same who had come to Daniel in Persia? Or was that a behind-the-scenes tidbit revealed only to Luke, the author of the account?

Whatever the situation, Mary stays about three months, most of the rest of Elizabeth's term. I find it curious that she didn't remain, as well, for the birth of Elizabeth's baby. But maybe having by that time received confirmation of her own pregnancy, Mary is gently but firmly encouraged to return home to embrace her own purpose, despite what misunderstandings are sure to follow or wrongs which family and community might assign her.

But what comfort Mary must have been to Elizabeth, waiting in seclusion for the child she longed for but was sure would never come. And what encouragement Elizabeth surely was to Mary. And how like God, in all His infinite wisdom and care, even as He provided the world with the Redeemer Messiah and the prophet to prepare the hearts of a community for His earthly ministry, to also provide their mothers with a time of refuge and consolation in each other.

*McNear is a member of New Hope Free Lutheran, Jamestown, N.D.
"Visitatie," by Benedetto Caliarì (1592-96).*

TO BE COUNTED

BY PASTOR GREG SCHRAM

I don't know about you, but I cannot think about Christmas apart from Calvary. I cannot peek into Bethlehem's manger without seeing in the crib a cross and a crown.

In Luke 2:1-7 (ESV) we read of Joseph and his pregnant-betrothed, Mary, going to Bethlehem to be registered. It was a decree of Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. Four times in these seven verses we find the word "register." In other words, Mary and Joseph—and all of the Roman world—were to be counted.

The counting of things and registration of names is important to God. After all, He is the Supreme Accountant. He has numbered and given names to all the stars (Psalm 147:4). He has counted all the hairs on everyone's heads (Matthew 10:30). And He has determined the days for each of our lives (Psalm 139:16). Matthew 1 contains the genealogy of Jesus. Nehemiah 11 and 12 contain the numbering/listing of people and priests returning from Babylonian captivity. The entire Book of Numbers is all about ... well, numbers (counting).

Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem to be counted. They went to Bethlehem for this purpose, a place, ironically, that "received them not" (Luke 2:7)—a precursor of sorts to their soon-to-be-born son who came to His own, but "his own people did not receive him" (John 1:11). They went to be counted each as a child of God (Luke 2:4). Unashamed, they were to be so identified.

How about you? How about me? Are we willing to be counted as children of God, to be identified, to go on record, to be registered as people who bring the Messiah into a world lost in the darkness of sin? Or are we ashamed (Mark 8:38)? Or afraid?

Be counted. Abraham's faith was "counted" to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). Paul "counted" all gain as loss for the "surpassing worth of knowing Christ" (Philippians 3:7). Jesus, himself, was counted as the "only Son" of God (John 3:16). He was "counted worthy of more glory than Moses" (Hebrews 3:3).

Yes, the babe in Mary's womb was Himself willing to be counted. Thirty-three years later, when standing on trial before Pilate, the Roman governor asked Him, "So you are a king?" (John 18:37a). And Jesus replied, "... For this purpose I was born, and for this purpose I have come into the world ..." (vs. 37b). It was a testimony that sealed His death.

Jesus was willing to be counted for us—counted as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Like His mother and father, Jesus was counted. He was counted/selected/sent/ordained by the Father to be



IN THOSE DAYS A DECREE WENT OUT
FROM CAESAR AGUSTUS THAT ALL THE
WORLD SHOULD BE REGISTERED.

the Savior of the world, your Savior and mine.

When His work on earth was accomplished, Jesus returned to His Father in heaven. We, too, someday, will return to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier to give an accounting of our lives (Romans 14:12). “What shall I do with Jesus?” asked Pilate (Matthew 27:22). This will be the essence of our accounting.

What have I done with Jesus? What have you done with Him? Have we been willing to be counted? Each day for every one of us is filled with a trip into town—an opportunity to be counted. For some of us, several trips. Each day is filled with calls (“decrees,” if you will) to go to our “Bethlehem” to be counted. And, strange as it may sound, sometimes it is best to be counted as one not counted. Not counted as a friend of the world (James 4:4). Not counted as ones who would bow their knees to Baal and kiss him (I Kings 19:18). But counted instead as

obeying God and not man (Acts 5:29). Willing, then, to be counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41).

Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem to be counted. There, Mary “gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger” (vs. 7). To Calvary their son would later go to be counted, for you, for me, for the world.

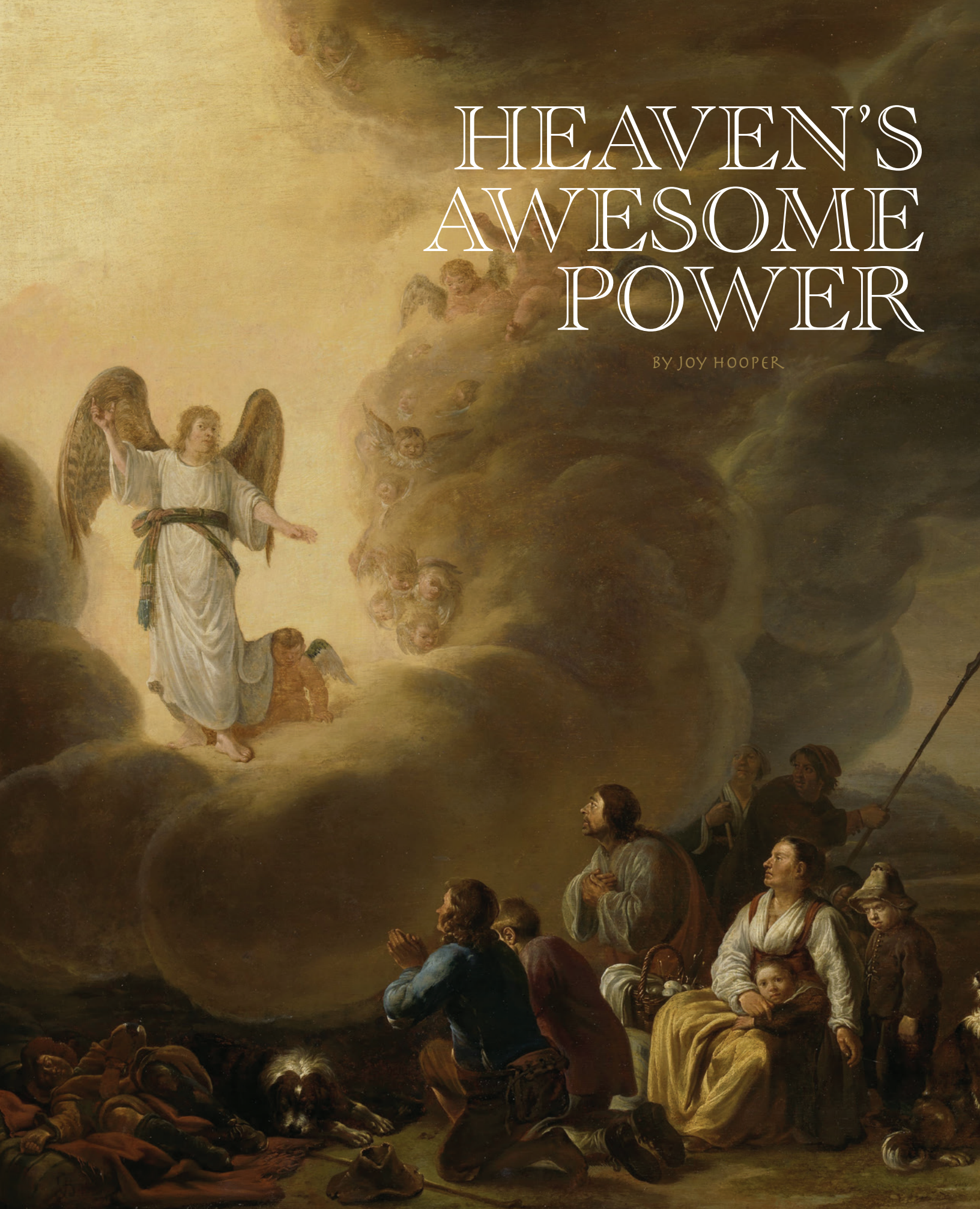
I cannot think about Christmas apart from Calvary. I cannot peek into Bethlehem’s manger and not see cradled with the Christ-child a crown and a cross, symbols of His willingness to be counted. As He was counted for us, let us in true repentance and faith, gratefully and joyfully live lives worthy to be counted of Him.

Be counted.

Schram serves Lutheran Church of Hope, Loveland, Colo.

HEAVEN'S AWESOME POWER

BY JOY HOOPER



"AND THERE WERE SHEPHERDS LIVING OUT IN THE FIELDS NEARBY ... [AND] AN ANGEL OF THE LORD APPEARED TO THEM ... AND THEY WERE TERRIFIED. BUT THE ANGEL SAID TO THEM, 'DO NOT BE AFRAID. I BRING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY THAT WILL BE FOR ALL THE PEOPLE. TODAY, IN THE CITY OF DAVID, A SAVIOR HAS BEEN BORN TO YOU; HE IS CHRIST, THE LORD. ...' [AND] SUDDENLY A GREAT COMPANY OF THE HEAVENLY HOST APPEARED WITH THE ANGEL, PRAISING GOD ..." LUKE 2:8-13, NIV

At this time of year we find ourselves having multiple opportunities to hear the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth as we celebrate each Advent Sunday, watch a Christmas pageant, or listen to favorite Christmas carols and hymns. Some of you may even have a favorite portion of those accounts, a part that speaks directly to you in some special way. For myself, Luke's account of God involving a bunch of average shepherds in His birth story holds a special place in my heart.

This appreciation stems from an experience I had in December 1998 while touring the Holy Land. One particular day, my group toured Bethlehem. Toward late afternoon our group leader chose to stop outside Bethlehem so we could have some quiet time looking over the surrounding hills and a Bedouin shepherd's encampment and flocks. It was very peaceful, and I remember walking away from the main group, pondering how I was seeing the same hills those Christmas shepherds knew 2000 years before and wondering what it must have been like for them to see the angels.

As I stood there musing, I suddenly had an image flash with intense clarity upon my mind's eye—not of angels overhead singing as a peaceful choir in a beatific Renaissance painting—but of a vast, brilliant army standing in full armor on the ground and completely surrounding me with a multitude of voices proclaiming, "Glory to God in the highest!"—not as a song, but as how one hears a company of well-trained marines answering their drill sergeant. It was such a powerful image that my next thought was, "Wow! No wonder the shepherds had to first be greeted with, 'Do not be afraid.' I would have been terrified!"

While this experience is not remotely on the same level with scriptural accounts, that impression left an indelible image on my mind and has influenced how I have subsequently heard and read Luke chapter 2. Since that time, I have often wondered, had I been there that night, would my reaction have been the same as the shepherds?

According to Luke, the shepherds did not stand around trying to rationalize the experience away nor take time to question why such a visitation and message would be given to them—of all people. Nor did they use their obligations of caring for the sheep to keep them in the fields. No, the glimpse of heaven's awesome power compelled them into immediate action to find Jesus.

Additionally, after they had seen Jesus, Luke conveys an understanding (2:17) that the shepherds were fearless in their excitement to tell all what they had seen and heard. And that fearlessness transformed them from being just a bunch of blue-collar working guys into the first New Testament evangelists sharing the good news of Jesus.

Over these past two years, our world has pushed fear at every angle—the fears of illness and death, the fear of social ridicule, and the fear of social unrest. For many, the weight of these fears has manifested into isolation, depression, or self-destructive actions. But that is not God's invitation to us. He sees our brokenness and extends to us the same message the angel spoke to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid!" Though heaven's glory is veiled for the present, it is still reality; God is still on His throne. In the midst of escalating social chaos, God's invitation for us, His Church, is to courageously and boldly live while finding our rest and peace in Him.

Thus, as you enter into this Advent and Christmas season, hang onto God's promises and do not be overwhelmed by fears. As the shepherds did so many years ago, allow the reality of God's awesomeness to inspire and energize you to fearlessly share the good news of Christ's birth, life, and redemptive work with those around you. Because one day, possibly soon, we will all be witness to the angel hosts returning with Christ.

Hooper is a member of St. John's Free Lutheran, Duluth, Minn. "The Annunciation to the Shepherds," Cornelis Saftleven, 1630-1650.



In Wonder

By Ole Hallesby

That the birth of Christ is the greatest event in the history of the world is acknowledged, and time is reckoned from that point. The whole civilized world would agree that we count all historical events according to the birth of Christ. Therefore, we understand that this event was worthy and that there is something very great about Christmas, the festival of Christ's birth.

Further, Christmas is the world's greatest festival. We can say that no other festival is celebrated by many as is Christmas. True enough there are many who don't celebrate the birth of Christ at Christmas. But that doesn't alter the fact that the whole world has chosen the birthday of Jesus as its great and real festival of the year.

Yes, we have solid reason for celebrating Christmas. For that which happened that first Christmas night wasn't only history's greatest event, it was God's greatest wonder. Through the preparations of long centuries, He has performed many and marvelous wonders which had knitted the chosen people to their holy and gracious God. But even the greatest events among them, like the great deliverance from Egypt, are small compared to the marvel of the Christmas event: God became man.

Before that He had sent His message through mighty

prophets such as Moses, Elijah, and Amos. Now He came Himself. Look now into the stable. There lies God Himself as a little child in one of the mangers. This is the greatest wonder above all wonders. Is it not strange that people question this mystery? Yes, even refuse to believe it? Why doubt? For God Himself reveals it to us.

He designed this event not to fool us into thinking He was God, but He humbled Himself and took the form of a servant. Therefore, He came in the likeness of man. We see the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that He for our sake became poor so that we by His poverty might become rich.

One has aptly said of love that it doesn't offer gifts, but it gives itself. By Jesus' birth we see perfect love. God gives Himself to us in the literal sense that He came into our family and became one of us. He was born as we were, He lives as we live, he struggles as we struggle in our temptations and anxiety, He bears our blame, He suffers our penalty. He dies our death. He rises from our graves.

"For unto you is born this day a Savior," said the angel to the shepherds. Yes, that was salvation when God Himself entered mankind and took our fallen race in His merciful and powerful hand.

"Which shall be to all people," said the angel. Yes,



now that Jesus was born into Adam's fallen race, so can all people be saved. Hear this, you who believe that it is impossible for you to be saved: If you have committed the sins which fallen Adam's race are guilty of, God has done something which a thousand times over covers your sins. He was your brother and has paid your debt.

Listen now to what the angel said, "Fear not! For I bring glad tidings which are for all people!" This is your Christmas gift and your Christmas joy.

God's greatest marvel happened in the deepest stillness and in the greatest need. To be sure, there weren't many in Bethlehem that night who paid much attention to what happened in the stable. In those days it wasn't that unusual that poor travelers had to stay overnight with the animals. But in heaven there was great joy over the two who were in the stable. And in the moment when the Child was born, the heavens opened and the area around Bethlehem suddenly was bathed in heavenly light. Most of the people weren't aware. They slept. Only some shepherds were awake and saw the light.

They stood there spellbound in the unusual light. Then an angel appeared and told them not to be afraid, that a Child had been born for whom they had been waiting

so earnestly through the long days and dark nights. The angel of light had brought the message and there followed a great host of angels singing praise to the Child who had been born.

That was the first Christmas song on earth. The angels sang it and the shepherds learned. And soon it spread from neighborhood to neighborhood, from country to country, from family to family. That Child can bring heaven and earth much blessing!

Yes, and so that Child, whom the Bible calls "wonderful," is God's greatest wonder. So, it isn't so strange that the heavens opened, that the angels sang, and that all joined in the heavenly song of praise.

But it is wonderful that this Christmas song cheers our hearts and sounds from our lips year-round.

You, little Child, when I see you in your poverty and need, then I see what it cost you to be the world's Savior. You were born in a stable and died on a cross. Let me thank you with my song of praise.

"God's Most Notable Wonder," Hellige Jul, 1947. Translated from Norwegian by Pastor Raynard Huglen, Newfolden, Minn. "The Nativity," by Giuliano Traballese, 1727-1812.

Johnson exits as HM director

In a news release to members of the AFLC Mission Corporation dated Nov. 12, Home Missions Committee members announced the exit of its director, Pastor Jim Johnson.

"The Home Missions Committee is in the midst of a leadership transition and change. As of November 12, 2021, Pastor James L. Johnson is no longer serving as the Home Missions director," stated the letter. "We are grateful to Pastor Jim for his service, including his guidance of the Home Missions Committee in a focused approach to church planting with a new mission statement: Helping Churches Plant Churches."

Johnson was called as director in 2018 after the retirement of previous director, Pastor Paul Nash. Johnson was installed during the Annual Conference held in Dickinson, N.D. He previously served Good Shepherd Free Lutheran, Camarillo, Calif.

The committee members did not announce future plans to pursue a new director in the letter, but asked for prayers "that the Lord would lead, guide, and grant wisdom to the Home Missions Committee as we remain steadfastly committed to serving the members of the AFLC in helping churches plant churches."

Luther devotional gets new life in fresh reprint

Ambassador Publications, working in cooperation with the Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary, has published an authorized reprint of *Luther for the Busy Man*. Out of print for many years, the refreshed daily devotional will be available soon in print (softcover \$15, hardcover \$25), and is now a daily podcast recording on Apple Podcasts and Spotify and a daily email via a subscriber list.



Luther for the Busy Man breaks up Martin Luther's sermons on the standard Gospel texts into manageable daily excerpts, organized according to the Church Year. Whether you are well-read in Luther or meeting the Reformer for the first time, readers are encouraged to get

nourishment for the soul through daily reminders of justification by faith in Christ and enrich their understanding of all of its implications for life.

Preorders of the newly published volume, now being printed, can be made through the website (lutherforthebusyman.org) and through AFLC Parish Education (ambassadorpublications.org).

Christmas concerts planned on campus

The Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary will host Parents' Weekend Dec. 3-5 on its Plymouth, Minn., campus, culminating in two Christmas concerts featuring Bible College and seminary choirs and musicians. With the theme, "God's Glory Revealed," the concerts will be held at 7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 4, and 4 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 5. Register online at flbc.edu/events. Gospel teams will present an evening concert on Friday, Dec. 3. And the Conqueror's basketball teams will play at 1 and 3 p.m. Dec. 4.



Pastor Lance Morrison was installed Sept. 10 at Our Savior's Lutheran, Dillon, Mont., with Pastor Lyndon Korhonen, AFLC president, officiating. Pictured are Pastor Lyndon and Linda Korhonen and Pastor Lance and Gretchen Morrison.

Events for youth, youth workers

Youth Worker Weekends, January 14-16, at the Association Retreat Center, near Osceola, Wis. Registration is open to all who serve teens. Featuring training sessions with Jim Bjork from Young Life. Visit aflc.org/youth for more information.

ARC winter youth retreats: Side X Side (grades 9-12) and SnoDaze (grades 5-8) will be held Feb. 4-6 at the Association Retreat Center near Osceola, Wis. Pastor Jason Holt is the featured speaker for Side X Side and Pastor Brett Boe is the speaker for SnoDaze. Register online (arc-aflc.org) by Jan. 23.

D6 Family Conference, April 20-22, in Orlando, Fla. A family ministry conference, with the theme, "Reset," aims to help church leaders, staff, volunteers and parents value the past, look forward, and properly evaluate without making hasty predictions. More information can be found at D6family.com/d6conference.

ARC summer camps: Onward (grades 9-12) and Fire Up (grades 5-8) will be held June 26-30 at the camp located near Osceola, Wis.

FLY Beyond, July 17-21, at the Association Retreat Center. The national youth equipping conference focuses on preaching, teaching, apologetics, and worldview in a small group learning environment for a powerful week of spiritual growth under the theme, "Upward," from Ephesians 4:11-16. For more information, visit aflc.org/youth/fly-beyond. Two options available include in-person attendance and an online digital camp.

The West Central Minnesota District WMF held their fall rally on Oct. 2, 2021. Host church

was Calvary Free Lutheran in Fergus Falls, Minn. Thirty-two ladies representing 10 churches in our district of 16 churches (and some men) gathered for a good day of learning and fellowship. Our theme for the day was “Take Heart and Do Not Fear,” and the theme verse was Matthew 14:27, “But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; Do not be afraid’” (NRSV).

Our morning session included worship time and devotions, and then our main speaker, Jon Nelson, shared about Journey Missions. The ministry helps people gain a passion for missions through short-term missionary trips to other countries and sending short-term assistants to work alongside missionaries on the field. Jon stated that everyone has a roll in the church and

TAKE HEART, DO NOT FEAR

BY CAROL KNAPP

missions—to either go, give, or pray. He also shared briefly about each AFLC missionary (and those on loan to other missionary organizations) and their area of ministry.

A business meeting was held, during which a first vote was taken on various changes to the constitution. Election of officers was also held with Pastor Jim Johnson then installing these officers: Lonna Olson as president, Anne Manderud as treasurer, and Linda Nelson as mission secretary.

Following a delicious lunch served by the ladies from Calvary, with good fellowship around the lunch tables, our afternoon session began with a beautiful solo by Patty Albertson. Then a mission’s report was given by Linda Nelson, highlighting prayer requests that each missionary had shared. We then had a time of prayer for our missionaries.

Our main speaker for the afternoon was

Heidi Nelson. She shared a wonderful Bible study on our theme, “Take Heart and Do Not Fear.” Jesus meets us in the middle of the chaos and is bigger than our fears. Like the disciples “in the middle of the night, in the middle of the storm, in the middle of the sea,” often we’re most afraid when we’re in the middle of a trial. And like the disciples, we are safest when we are in the palm of God’s hand. Let us daily remind ourselves, no matter the circumstances, to trust Jesus.

After singing our theme song, “Because He Lives,” we recited together our theme verse and prayed the Lord’s Prayer to conclude our time together.

I believe we all left feeling encouraged in our walk with Christ.

Knapp is a member of Sunburg Free Lutheran, Sunburg, Minn.

Hunter keynotes FLBCS banquet

Dr. Ron Hunter, executive director and CEO of Randal House and D6 Family Ministries, was the featured speaker at the annual Friends of FLBCS Banquet, held Nov. 11 in the Student Life Center on the Plymouth, Minn., campus. Hunter also spoke to Bible college and seminary students during a student assembly on Nov. 12 (right).

In the student assembly, Hunter emphasized the importance of equipping families to meet the needs of children and youth as the world anticipates transitioning out of the pandemic.

“Discipleship is not an event, it is a way of life,” said Hunter. “It is a practice not a posture.”

Hunter outlined the recent history of youth discipleship in the evangelical Church, which for many years has given youth ministers the responsibility of faith formation of the children and youth in a congregation. This focus naturally led to the formation of other small group demographics—seniors, men’s groups, women’s groups, etc.—which can isolate individuals within a family.

The pandemic, said Hunter, has highlighted the weakness of this ministry strategy.

“Your kids are on loan to you,” said Hunter. “Your job is to help them become wise decision makers.”

Hunter advocates a strategy in which congregational ministry equips families to become disciple makers.



Transition to free subscriptions

Beginning in January 2022, *The Lutheran Ambassador* magazine will be free of charge to subscribers. For nearly 60 years, our magazine has existed to educate readers about the AFLC, to encourage the local congregation, to equip Christians for service, and to evangelize our neighbors and the world. Our staff is honored by our mission to be ambassadors for Christ.

If you wish to begin receiving our monthly publication, please contact Liz McCarlson (lasubscriptions@aflc.org). You may also subscribe online at aflc.org/lutheran-ambassador. Our print version can be mailed to your home address or to your local congregation in bulk. We also offer a digital version which can be found on the Issuu app, available in the Apple store and Google Play. Both the app and the magazine are free.

While our magazine will be free, we will continue to incur production costs of nearly \$60/year per subscriber. For many years, that cost has been subsidized by our common AFLC ministries. Our free subscription means that we will be dependent on donations. Check our website for giving opportunities. We appreciate your support as we work to serve our AFLC congregations.

OCTOBER MEMORIALS

AED

Pastor Paul Nash
Doris Olson

Bible College

Ralph Peterson
Evelyn Copes
Elaine Pollestad
Ruth Claus

General Fund

Doris Olson
Lois Myhre

World Missions

Mary Nash
Dolores Setterholm
Lois Myhre

Home Missions

Mary Nash
Pastor Paul Nash

Parish Education

Mark Langemo

Seminary

Marian Western
Stan Christenson
Mary Nash
Joanne Vedvei
Ray Hudson
Jimmy Anderson
Dan Hager

FLAPS

Pastor Paul Nash

WMF

Evelyn Copes
JoAnn Carlson

Vision

Deb Benson



A LONG OBEDIENCE

BY BECKY ABEL

"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

The work of missions includes sharing Jesus with people in one-on-one encounters and evangelistic outreaches (planting the seed). It also requires the long obedience of consistent investment in people's lives (watering the seed). As missionaries, we realize that we only play a small part in the beautiful miracle that only God can perform. He is the one who makes things grow. We have spent our lives planting and watering. Some plants have withered and died, others are just surviving, and still others are strong and healthy.

Tedy came to Christ during

our first years of ministry in the rural town of Bateias. He vividly remembers the first time his father invited the family to come to a Wednesday night meeting at the ARCA when he was 12 years old. After months of studying the Bible through Profession of Faith classes, the family was baptized on May 30, 1993. Tedy remembers repeating a prayer with Pastor Paul on that occasion, which assured him of his salvation in Jesus—an important beginning in his spiritual life. Although the rest of the family was eventually lured away from the Lord, Tedy stayed strong in his faith and has exemplified a life of long obedience.

Tedy became a wonderful example to other students in the local high school, unashamedly testifying of his faith in Christ. He spent a lot of time at our home and working for the ARCA. After high school he decided to study at our Bible school in Campo Mourão and went on to finish his seminary training there. During that time, he worked in a ministry with troubled teens for four years, an experience that molded his life as he put into practice concepts he had learned in the classroom. He met his wife, Miriam, at Bible school and today they have a 16-year-old son, Yuri, who is very active in church. Tedy went on to study for an education degree and has now finished his bachelor's degree in law.



After being away from Bateias for many years, he returned with his family in 2010 in response to an opportunity to work for the state judicial system in Curitiba.

Although Tedy did not pursue full-time ministry as a pastor, he has always been very involved in the local church ministry and served for many years on the national church board. He is currently president of the Bateias congregation. His servant heart is demonstrated regularly as he joyfully and unassumingly volunteers his time and talents to help us with social projects for the poor—a true kindred spirit! Tedy appreciates the emphasis of the Free Lutheran Church in teaching doctrine and godly values based on the Word of God. He enjoys the simplicity of our local church, a welcoming family of believers who enjoy being together and working side by side.

We observe with grateful hearts how God has caused the seed which we planted and watered to grow into a faithful, dedicated servant who loves Jesus and who blesses the church of God through his long obedience.

Abel and her husband, Pastor Paul, serve as AFLC missionaries in Curitiba, Brazil.

PEOPLE & PLACES

One of three **Lutherans for Life** fall regional conferences was hosted by Living Word Free Lutheran, Sioux Falls, S.D., on October 16. The theme was "God Chose You" (John 15:16).

Correction: **Pastor Patrick Charles** continues to serve Good Shepherd Lutheran, Pleasanton, Texas. His resignation, printed in the September issue, was incorrect.

Pastor Karl Anderson has announced his retirement, effective the end of January 2022. He serves the McIntosh, Minn., parish of Trinity Lutheran and Mount Carmel Lutheran.

Michael Onstad, a 2021 graduate of the Free Lutheran Seminary, was ordained Oct. 31 at St. Paul's Free Lutheran, Fargo, N.D., with Pastor Lyndon Korhonen, AFLC president, officiating.

Pastor Martin Horn, Crystal, Minn., is serving as interim pastor at Christian Free Lutheran, Wheatland, Iowa.

Grong Free Lutheran, Rolag, Minn., has been moved from the inactive church roster to the active roster. The congregation is served by Pastor Gary Simons.

Pastor Joel Baker, Minneapolis, has resigned as pastor of Plymouth (Apostolic) Lutheran Church, Plymouth, Minn., effective next summer.

Pastor Jesse Kneeland has resigned from Living Hope Church, Rogers, Minn.

St. Mark's Lutheran, Whitestown, Ind., is now served by Pastor Greg Albert, who served the congregation from 2008 to 2017.

Pastor Blake Kilbourne has accepted a call to serve Our Saviour's Lutheran, Dickinson, N.D. Kilbourne has also been placed onto the AFLC fellowship roster.

Deeper Life conference

Members of Peace Free Lutheran Church in Canal Winchester, Ohio, recently hosted an annual Deeper Life Conference with special speaker Pastor Dan Giles and his wife, Debbie. The theme of the conference was "Forgiveness."

The conference began on Sunday, Oct. 17, with an evangelistic message and continued with evening services through Wednesday, Oct. 20. Debbie Giles also spoke at a women's luncheon. The Lord worked through each service.

For those interested in experiencing the evening services, video recordings have been posted on Peace's Lutheran's YouTube channel. Visit YouTube.com and in the search box, enter: Peace Free Lutheran.

2022 Lutheran Ambassador schedule

Below is the 2022 schedule for *The Lutheran Ambassador*. Please be in prayer for each issue. Note the deadlines and special emphasis of each issue. If you have an idea regarding a general article, a certain issue, or have an interest in writing, please contact the editors. Email us at ruthg@afcl.org or call (763) 545-5631.

ISSUE DATE	DEADLINE	ISSUE THEME
January	November 29	Christian Education
February	January 3	Evangelism
March	January 31	Luther's Catechism
April	February 28	Lent/Easter
May	March 18	AFLC Schools
June	April 29	Fruit of the Spirit
July	May 30	Missions
August	July 1	Conference Review
September	July 29	Youth
October	August 29	AFLC turns 60
November	September 30	Thanksgiving
December	October 31	Advent/Christmas

Please note, information regarding the Annual Conference, scheduled for June 15-18 at the Association Retreat Center, near Osceola, Wis., will be featured in the May issue, with a deadline of March 18. This issue will include the schedule, board and committee nominees, registration, and WMF Day schedule and registration. Other conference information will be printed as it is available, including youth and children's activities.

FLBCS receives Student Life Center gift

The Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary has received a \$1 million gift for the benefit of the Student Life Center, the newest building on campus. The SLC opened in the spring of 2021 and contains a college basketball/volleyball court, classroom space, locker rooms, offices, and a large commons area with a coffee shop. This most recent gift pushes the capital campaign total over the \$5 million mark, more than half way to the original goal of \$8.5 million. The total cost of the project, including some but not all furnishings and fixtures, is \$9.6 million.

AFLC BENEVOLENCES January 1-October 31, 2021

FUND	REC'D IN OCTOBER	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	PRIOR YEAR-TO-DATE
General Fund	\$28,941	\$333,111	\$317,259
Evangelism	18,387	111,306	108,983
Youth Ministries	38,255	173,576	108,374
Parish Education	33,264	167,422	119,882
Seminary	47,425	253,148	228,538
Bible College	63,381	376,313	289,063
Home Missions	70,256	546,846	305,478
World Missions	83,041	380,996	329,443
Personal Support	55,386	682,563	727,807
TOTALS	\$438,336	\$3,025,280	\$2,534,829

For additional financial information for each department, go to www.afcl.org/giving

WHEN CHRISTMAS FINDS US

There's an interesting line in an old hymn that mentions Christmas, even though it is not included in the section of our hymnal where other hymns are found that mention the birth of our Savior.

*With God in grace I'm dwelling,
What harm can come to me.
From worldly powers compelling
My way thus closed to be?
Though they in chains may bind me
Inside this prison cell,
Yet Christmas here can find me;
Within my heart 'tis well.
(Ambassador Hymnal, 494)*

This year marks the 250th anniversary of the birth of the author of this hymn, Hans Nielsen Hauge, and it would be sad if the year passes away without a mention of this Norwegian lay evangelist who holds an important place in our heritage as well as in his homeland.



Pastor Robert Lee

After a profound spiritual awakening, Hauge traveled from town to town throughout Norway for about eight years, usually on foot, preaching from God's Word whenever and wherever he had an opportunity. This was a challenge to the church authorities, however, since such meetings were against the law. After many arrests and warnings he was imprisoned, spending almost ten years awaiting trial. The first five years were quite severe, and his health was permanently weakened.

Wilhelm Pettersen, the author of *The Light in the Prison Window*, tells the story of two friends who tried to visit Hauge in prison on Christmas Eve, 1805, but who were denied entrance. When they stood below his barred window, singing a hymn of encouragement, they saw a candle lifted high enough for them to see. Then it disappeared, only to return again, trimmed and burning clearer and brighter. The

message was clear, too: Light is victorious over darkness, and times of cleansing make the light shine even brighter.

One may speculate that his prison experience was in the mind of Hauge when he wrote the words of this hymn. Christmas found him, in spite of tragic circumstances, and in his heart all was well.

Will Christmas find you and me this year? It's a strange phrase, as one normally doesn't think of Christmas seeking us. After all, how could we possibly miss it? In the stores Halloween candy and decorations suddenly disappear and are replaced with all of the Christmas paraphernalia ... from poinsettias to pre-decorated trees, holiday music in the air, television specials to enjoy (or endure), as well as prospective gifts galore to purchase for family and friends. We're reminded, too, from many sources of the so-called Christmas "spirit" that should move us to think more of others than ourselves.

My dictionary says simply that Christmas is a holiday (holy day) on December 25 celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, period. Please notice that there is no mention of all the other things mentioned in the paragraph above that we associate with the season. Could it be that it is Christmas, in this sense, seeking to find us and meet us where we are?

Yes, there are obstacles on the path to discovery. Some of us get so busy that we find the celebration to be quite exhausting, forgetting that the holiday is a holy day. Others are burdened by family struggles, loss of employment and growing debt, failing health, the absence of a dear one.

*Though they in chains may bind me
inside this prison cell ...*

Probably none of our circumstances compare with the trials of Hauge many years ago. His health was failing; he was denied a Bible as well as the visits of friends and family, and he was tempted to despair.

*Yet Christmas here can find me; within
my heart 'tis well.*

Yes, Christmas can find us this year, regardless of our circumstances.

The promise was given: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

And the promise was fulfilled: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world

*Some of us ... find
the celebration to
be quite exhausting,
forgetting that the
holiday is a holy day.*

to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:16-17). "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Look to Jesus and have a truly wonderful Christmas!

something to share

THE STRANGE MIRACLE INCARNATE

BY GRACIA GILBERTSON

A light dusting of snow fell on the hills, a fresh reminder that the Advent season would soon be here. The celebration of Advent was a big deal in my family as I was growing up. As soon as Thanksgiving was over, my mother would make an Advent wreath out of floral foam and fresh greens, with candles signifying the four Sundays of Advent. Dad would read Scripture passages addressing the symbolism of each candle as we prepared to celebrate His coming, the incarnation, what C. S. Lewis called “the grand miracle.”

I’ve long been a C.S. Lewis fan, beginning with the *Chronicles of Narnia* Dad read to us. If you are familiar with these books, you may remember Father Christmas gave Susan several gifts, including a horn, saying, “And when you put this horn to your lips and blow it, then, wherever you are, I think help of some kind will come to you.” Later, when the horn had been lost, then found again, Doctor Cornelius said, “It is said that whoever blows it shall have strange help—

no one can say how strange.”

The horn was used twice in the *Chronicles*. Both times, the help that came was not what was expected or hoped for, yet turned out to be exactly what was needed. In fact, the second time the horn was used, the help was delayed, and some believed it had failed. Yet, in response, Trufflehunter said, “The help will come. I stand by Aslan. Have patience ... the help will come. It may even now be at the door.”

Reflecting on these stories, I thought about how the coming of Jesus was predicted for hundreds of years before He came in the flesh. Yet, He didn’t come in the way that anyone expected. As author Jon Bloom wrote in a *Desiring God* article, “Have you stopped to ponder just how strange everything about the birth of Jesus was? Whatever people had imagined the coming of the Messiah to look like, no one imagined it to look like it did. In all that He reveals to us about that strange first Christmas, God is saying some very important things to us about how He wants us to view the perplexing, bewildering,

glorious, frustrating, fearful, painful, unexpected, disappointing, and even tragic experiences of our lives. No one really understood all that was going on as God the Son entered the world. No one really saw the big picture—no one except God.”

Isn’t that true of us? Sometimes we reject the answer God sends because it does not look like what we expected. As Tim Keller, pastor and author, said, “God may often appear to be slow, but He never forgets his promises ... when his promises come true (and they will come true), they always burst the banks of what you imagined. This is one of the main themes of the Nativity, and indeed, the Bible.”

As we reflect on the miracle of the incarnation, may we remember that He still hears our cries for help. And when the help seems long in coming, we can hold onto hope that “the Heavenly guest is at the door.” And so, we continue to pray, “O Come, O come, Emmanuel.”

Gilbertson lives in Leavenworth, Wash.