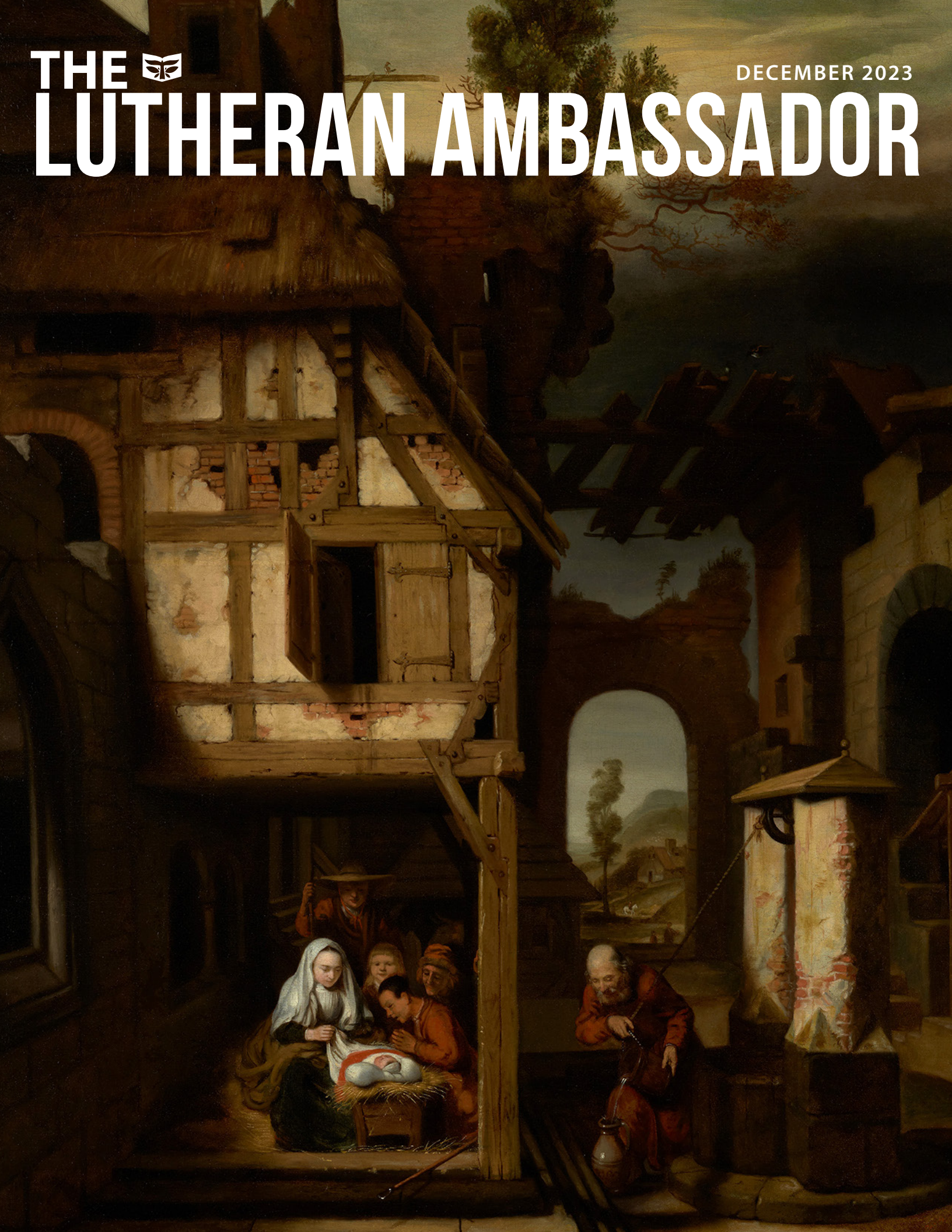


THE 

DECEMBER 2023

# LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR





ENCOURAGING  
**WORD**



## THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

DECEMBER 2023  
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# THIS BLESSED POTLUCK

BY PASTOR TIM HERSET

**N**oses wiggle during the ritualistic removal of crock pot lids by the smiling servants adorned in the holy vestments of generations-old kitchen aprons. The flurry of movement, a well-choreographed dance, sets the table that is described as a testing of chance.

Without instruction, the aroma of food causes bodies to form a single file line—classical conditioning in action for students of psychology to observe. Eyes squint as rays of sunshine burst through windows, and ears buzz as unsuspecting congregants crack jokes, causing more than a few faces to flush.

A shrill, sharp whistle silences the crowd, and a soft soprano starts the singing, leading to the subtle three-part harmony of an old, familiar prayer. Weathered hands shuffle paper plates and napkins swifter than a card dealer at a casino; the only gamble here is choosing what makes it on the plate.

A piping hot casserole and boiling pot of chili calmly settle in next to three versions of meatballs, representing the cultural history of these people. The cheesy potatoes disappear faster than anyone can answer the question: Is it really a salad if the main ingredients are Cool Whip and candy bars?

A 6-year-old boy with eyes bigger than his stomach watches his paper plate fold, his hot dish hit the floor, and the caring cleanup crew come

into action. A tender soul sees the sadness on his face and gives up her place in line—a seemingly small act, but the heart behind the sacrifice is known by God.

As the line continues and the tables fill, the options become limited; Carolyn's Classic 8 Can Casserole competes with a "cutting edge" recipe: Costco pizza. The pizza slices won't get space on the plate when off in the distance, caught by a keen eye, one sees pumpkin and apple and pecan, perfect slices of pie.

It is a tender time, and it is a peaceful place to eat dessert first, to go back for seconds, and to rejoice with the saints who feed our bodies and our souls. The stories told around these plastic tables and folding chairs are the collective memories of a group of people captivated by God's great salvation story.

Hearts overflow as it becomes clear—the Lord is present. And by His Spirit near those gathered at these tables, God's glory is adored and man's hunger restored. His mercies bless more than we need and grant us gifts we have received: this place, these people, the free and living congregation gathered together without reservation.

*Herset serves as the co-pastor of Faith Free Lutheran, Kalispell, Mont.*

Are you frightened? Then come to him, lying in the lap of the fairest and sweetest maid. You will see how great is the divine goodness, which seeks above all else that you should not despair. Trust him! Trust him! Here is the Child in whom is salvation.

—Martin Luther

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

—John 1:14

What shall I say! And how shall I describe this birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of Days has become an infant. He who sits upon the sublime and heavenly throne, now lies in a manger . . . He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me His Spirit that He may save me.

—John Chrysostom

Salvation is not a reward for the righteous, it is a gift for the guilty.

—Steven Lawson

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,  
From angels bending near the earth, to touch their harps of gold;  
"Peace on the earth, good-will to men,  
from heaven's all-gracious King,"  
The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.

—It Came upon the Midnight Clear  
(Ambassador Hymnal #24)

**S**ilent Night” is a cute song. There’s something peaceful, comforting, and nostalgic about that song sung at a church’s candlelit Christmas program. Depictions of the stable, shepherds, and a starry sky bring me back to comforting memories of my childhood. Yet I can’t help but also imagine what was going on behind the scenes during this unassuming, silent night in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. Its humble outward presentation reveals little of what was happening unseen. And maybe that’s the point.

I estimate that I’ve heard the Christmas story about a thousand times, so for me, it doesn’t read as being out of the ordinary anymore. In fact, the story is so ingrained in our cultural folklore that even children in unchurched families could probably recite the basics. Baby Jesus in a manger. Shepherds and wise men. Bright star. Something about a donkey? I wonder if sometimes the marvel and significance of God himself entering a dark world as a fragile infant is lost on any westerner, Christians included.

Have you ever held a baby? They’re cute. Nothing powerful is ever cute. Helpless and innocent is cute. Flailing, useless, chubby arms and legs are cute. Lopsided dopey grins are cute. God decided the best way to save humanity from sin and certain death was by becoming cute—effectively harmless.

How ironic is that? And so like God. The biggest battle was fought with the seemingly smallest of weapons. This theme echoes throughout the rest of Jesus’ life and, really, the entire Bible.

John chapter 1 fascinates me. Where the book of Matthew starts with genealogies, making a factual argument for Jesus being the Messiah, John begins with a poetic, somewhat abstract description of God’s redemption story that looks past the physical. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

There are a couple of ways this verse is translated. While the ESV words it as “darkness has not *overcome*” the light, other translations read, “the darkness has not *understood* it.” The most parallel word in English, in which the double meaning is most apparent, would be “grasp.” “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not *grasped* it.” Whether John was indicating a physical grasp or a mental grasp, both senses of the word certainly make true statements here and are verified elsewhere in Scripture.

First, the physical. While the story of the life of Jesus

would be enough to keep us on the edge of our seats with all of its twists and turns, we all know the end of the story. God wins. Light defeats darkness. We know that the darkness has not grasped and stolen away the light because we have the light. The light has not been extinguished—quite the opposite! The light has spread all over the earth through the people of God, the Church.

This other truth is intriguing, though, especially within the context of the first Christmas. The darkness did not *grasp* the light in a cognitive sense. It did not *understand* it.

The prince of darkness certainly did not understand it. While he put up roadblocks in Jesus’ path to the cross, he didn’t seem to get what the final destination was or what it would accomplish. Of course, on this side of things, it seems obvious to us because we have the whole story. But we are no more enlightened in our sin than the devil is. Any understanding on our part is thanks to the Holy Spirit working in us.

God’s plan of salvation isn’t hard to understand because it is secret; it is hard to understand because it seems foolish. Understanding the gospel takes more than just learning facts and giving the right answers. One must become a fool to understand it.

To better understand the light, let’s take a closer look at the darkness. What is it? What was Jesus shining his light into? It’s not physical darkness. It’s not the darkness of the uneducated. It’s not the darkness of pain and suffering. While at times Jesus did address all three of these problems, he primarily came to shine light into the darkness of our sin.

So how is our sin like darkness? And why do we need to become fools to understand the light? The answer is pride. Pride doesn’t allow for the narrative of the weak shaming the strong. Pride doesn’t stand for being made a fool. Pride doesn’t admit, “I am wrong. Help me.”

When one knows he is a fool, he is finally ready to understand the Light.

So maybe “silent night” is an appropriate description of the first Christmas, after all. While God was accomplishing our salvation, the darkness of our prideful world didn’t yet know what hit it.

This year, when you hear songs of a silent night around your cozy fireplace, thank God for the absolute foolishness of sending a baby to conquer our sin.

*Quanbeck is a member of Faith Free Lutheran, Minneapolis.*

A child is lying in bed, partially covered by a blanket, looking up towards a beam of light from a nightlight. The scene is dimly lit with a blue hue. The title text is overlaid on a white-bordered square in the upper portion of the image.

# THE LIGHT OVER COMES

BY LUKE QUANBECK

A night sky filled with a meteor shower, with numerous bright streaks of light falling across a dark blue and black background. In the foreground, a lone, bare tree stands in a field of dry, brown grass. The entire scene is framed by a thin white border.

# THE LIGHT EXPOSES AND INVITES

BY PASTOR BRIAN WESTERBUR

**W**ell, I goofed. Let's skip to the end of the story, where I wake up in the middle of a fallow cornfield in rural Minnesota. A soft spray of steam is rising out of the front of my car as my eyes dart around to take in my surroundings. It doesn't take me long to realize I had fallen asleep at the wheel, another 16-year-old becoming a statistic. I check my body, and everything seems to be in place; the car seems alright, except for the aforementioned mist rising from the front. I get out of the car and look back, the highway off in the distance.

Before long, I see a kindly semi truck driver pull over on the shoulder of State Highway 30 (the road from which I had deviated course), his headlights radiating a piercing shine acting as a spotlight, exposing my accident. On the one hand, relief sweeps over me as I discover I am not alone; on the other hand, as shock wears off, embarrassment soon settles in my stomach. A part of me wishes those beams would turn off and the semi would drive away so that, somehow, everything that had happened could just be forgotten and I could disappear. Funny how that light both drew me in and repulsed me.

The Apostle John, in his Gospel, calls the life of Jesus Christ the light of all mankind. At Christmas, we celebrate that this light came down to earth as a man, Jesus, who is the Christ, the Savior. But we also read in John's Gospel that the coming of this light had dual effects on mankind: some were drawn to this light, and others were repulsed by it. Jesus explains this in his teachings to Nicodemus in John 3:20–21 (ESV): "For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

As we read the words of Scripture, this Word of God is divided into law and gospel. These are defined in H.U. Sverdrup's explanation of *Luther's Small Catechism*: "The Law is the divine Word which tells us what we must do ... The Gospel is the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Savior" (p. 33–34). Putting this in the context of John 3: According to the law, the light of God exposes the darkness of our sin. According to the gospel, the light of God illuminates the work he has carried out in us.

Note that it is the same light in either case. The light that exposes our shameful acts and embarrassing secrets is the same light that invites us to come, so that it may shine on those things that God has carried out in us.

Yet that first part is the most difficult to accept. The world repulsed the light that exposed its sin. Like an immature adolescent shielding his eyes from the lights of a semi truck, the world did not accept the light and even wished it to be gone. In its delusion of its own self-righteousness, the world cried out for the crucifixion of the Light of the world. Anything that would snuff it out and let the world go on as it was in its depravity would suffice.


The light of that semi truck absolutely exposed my blunder, but the intent of the driver was not to bring me shame but to see to my wellbeing. While God knew that the world would hate Jesus because of his light shining in their comfortable darkness, his purpose in coming was not our humiliation but our salvation: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17).

As we read Scripture, we learn that the darkness of the world in Jesus' day was the same darkness of our hearts when Christ came to us. "Oh no, we are found out!" our hearts cry as we read or hear the law of God in Scripture. But this Word is not simply given to us to further our humiliation or drive the wretched shame of who we are deeper into our souls. These words are given to turn our gaze toward the light—to which we are drawn and invited—to receive salvation in Jesus' name. The same light that convicts us also draws us into salvation.

As the Apostle John later says in his first epistle, when we confess our sins, we discover the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin; we are forgiven and purified from all unrighteousness (see I John 1:5–10).

Eventually, I did accept the help of this truck driver, realizing the comfort of his presence diminished the shame of his headlights exposing my crashed car. He stayed with me while I waited for my parents. The light of the world is Jesus, and he came into the world not to condemn us but to bring us life through his death and resurrection. The light of the world is Jesus!

*Westerbur serves Bethel Free Lutheran, Grafton, N.D.*



**W**aking early, I looked out the front window, seeking the view of the lake below. It was hidden by fog that reached as far as my doorstep. The tall evergreens were hidden. An hour later, the trees began to show their shapes. Two hours later, and I could see the lake. Then the whole panorama made itself known. Soon the sun was shining brightly, and the blue sky was dressed in fluffy white clouds. I felt better. The fog had its own beauty, but I needed to see my view! I need light to see my day ahead.

As it happened, this day included a Bible study on the Book of John. Driving there, my mind went back to the portions in John where Jesus encounters three individuals who are about to have their perspectives changed from earthly thinking to eternal truths.

First, we meet Nicodemus as he knocks on Jesus' door one night. Though a man of some reputation, being a Pharisee, and a ruler of the Jews, he comes under the cover of darkness. He seems convinced that Jesus is a teacher with special gifts, but he does not yet accept him as the Messiah. We might say he was on the fence, in the throes of indecision, in a place of darkness where Satan dwells. I find myself not wanting to be too hard on Nicodemus. The words Jesus speaks to him about "being born again" are hard to understand. Perhaps you, like me, grew up with this teaching, and our understanding of it grew as we matured under the revelation of the Holy Spirit. But so far, Nicodemus doesn't get it.

Then Jesus says plainly, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (3:16). Jesus, the Light of the world, stands before an undecided Nicodemus and extends an open invitation to his gospel. It is an invitation available to any seeker of light and eternal life. This account doesn't give us a view into how he responded, but later in chapter 19, we see him with Joseph of Arimathea (another secret disciple) as they came to Pilate for permission to bury the body of Jesus. The truth of who Jesus is evidently became real for this man, who walked from the darkness of not understanding into the light of the truth.

I, too, have questions about spiritual matters. I sometimes find myself in the dark about how to act, what to say, or how to respond. Always, my time in God's Word brings the answers; Jesus's life and teachings show me the way.

The Samaritan woman in John 4 had a lot of questions for Jesus. Leaving her home in Sychar to get water at the well, she finds a Jewish man already there. Against custom, he speaks to her, asking for a drink. She questions him in return, wondering why he speaks to her. Jesus has broken down a cultural barrier before offering her living water. "Living water?" she asks. And so, her questions begin. As with Nicodemus, Jesus turns her earthly perspective into eternal thinking. This was a life-altering conversation for her as Jesus revealed his knowledge of the sin in which she lived. He reveals clearly to her that he is the Christ. What must have been an intimate conversation that followed between these two is not recorded, but a guilt-free woman left the well to tell her townspeople what had happened. Like her, some of them came to know Jesus as their Messiah.

I, too, have experienced joy and peace in the forgiveness of my sins. And, yes, our sins are secret, aren't they? But as Moses prayed in Psalm 90:8, "You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence."

The deep compassion of Jesus shines forth in his meeting with a blind man in John 9. The disciples are also brought to a new understanding—that this birth deformity was not a result of anyone's sin but so that God would be glorified. The story starts so casually: "... as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth" (9:1). But in reading Scripture, it seems evident that as Jesus went from place to place, it was never casual in the sense of it ever being a coincidence. Jesus said that he had to do the work of his Father. Bringing truth and light to darkened hearts was his business. "While I am in the world I am the light of the world," he declared (9:5). Saying this, he applied clay to the man's eyes and sent him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man came back seeing. What a testimony he had! When his neighbors debated whether he was the blind man they knew for years, you could hear his joy as he insisted, "Yes, yes, I am the one who sat and begged. But man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes, and I received my sight." He could have penned the well-known hymn, "Once I was blind, but now I can see—the Light of the world is Jesus."

Oh, Light of my life, I need you!

Oh, Light of my heart, I seek you!

Oh, Light of my soul, only you satisfy.

*Gunderson lives in Harrison, S.D.*





# THE LIGHT GIVES LIFE

BY CLARA GUNDERSON



**THE  
LIGHT  
REVEALS  
GLORY**

BY ZACH DAVIS

**C**lose to where I grew up, there was a summer camp. Every Christmas my family and I would visit this camp, not to row a canoe or shoot arrows at targets, but to look at something special. Each year, the visit would start out the same: we would arrive after sunset and take a cold, long walk through the forest. The moon was hidden behind the clouds, so our only company was the echo of our soggy tennis shoes crunching through the gravel and the soft rasp of our misted breath as we trekked through the dark.

To my younger self, this was anything but fun. Besides, who wanted to look at these so-called “Lights of Christmas” anyways?

At first, we glimpsed tiny sparks of light through evergreen branches. Soon, however, the sparks turned to flickering flames in the distance. Finally, turning one last corner, we reached our destination.

The camp was festooned in holiday cheer! Bright lights were strung all through the trees. Cabins were dressed up as igloos and toy shops. Hundreds of people moved in throngs, sipping steaming cups of cider and enjoying the sight of the lights. Indeed, they were beautiful. Thousands of string lights were arrayed in dazzling patterns, turning paths into glimmering highways, weaving trees into tapestries, and drawing constellations as bright as the ones hidden behind the clouds.

There is something uniquely beautiful about a light in the dark. It serves as a reminder and a promise; an assurance that the dark and the cold are only temporary and that good things are still to come.

On a night not unlike the one just mentioned, a light made its way into this world. This ember alighted upon a tiny town named Bethlehem, and Jesus Christ was born. For years, his people had wandered through the dark and cold of history, holding eagerly to the promise of a light ahead. Now, the Light was here, the promise fulfilled, and the world forever changed.

A light does not simply fight back the dark. Instead, a light demands that the dark leave by its mere presence alone. Jesus proved this as he grew. He cast out the darkness in his people, and he healed their infirmities. His light began to reveal not just what was wrong with them physically, but spiritually as well.

The light of Christ shows us our shortcomings, it reveals cracks and flaws in our nature. It also reveals him, and who he is. When cast upon Jesus, the light shows no

imperfections, and no shadows are revealed. Instead, we see his beautiful nature; Jesus is the perfect lamb, the firstborn of creation, able to endure the trials we cannot stand against and the temptations we fail. Jesus is God with us. The Light is here, and it is working.

When Jesus stood at night in the Garden of Gethsemane praying to his Father, his light shone brightly still. The “hour had come,” as John 17:1 says. A great work lay ahead, and the future seemed dark. It was here, however, that Jesus’ light revealed his Father’s plan. As Jesus had glorified God on earth, so too would God glorify the Son in the coming time. The Light had come into the world with a purpose, answering the hopes of his people. Now, he would leave this world to complete God’s plan of redemption. On a cross meant for sinners, the perfect lamb revealed by the light was slain. The Light was gone, and, for the first time since Bethlehem, the world seemed cold once more.

Winter is a season of darkness and cold. It is in this time, however, that we find the greatest joy, the greatest wonder, and the greatest hope. The babe in the manger is the fulfillment of one promise and the start of another. A promise that will overcome the world that does not understand it. A promise that offers eternal life. A promise that eradicates darkness with its light. From what seems like dying embers erupts a sunrise, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ fulfills the hope of his people! The night is over, forever gone. In its place, there is God’s light shown to the world. Jesus Christ, the Light, is here, and his light shall never leave.

Christ’s glory is revealed in this light. We see that the cold of winter is traded for warmth, the lies of the darkness are exchanged for the love of God. The Light of the world will never be snuffed out, for in Jesus’ sacrifice, evil has no power. Christ’s glory reveals to us a gift. Jesus says in Matthew 5 that we have his light within us, we each carry with us his flame. Like him, we become beacons of hope, each action of love meant to give glory to the Father above. Finally, Christ’s glory reveals to us the love of the Father. Through this babe in a manger, a promise is kept. The faithfulness of a God who loves his people is shown. Through the dark and cold winter, a light remains. He will neither leave us nor forsake us. In Christ’s light, we are his, and he is ours.

*Davis, a first-year student at the Free Lutheran Bible College, is a member of Atonement Free Lutheran, Arlington, Wash.*

In John chapter 10, Jesus refers to himself as both the “gate to the sheep pen” and the “good shepherd.” His followers could relate to this illustration; interacting with sheep and shepherds was a common occurrence at that time and place.

When Jesus described himself as the “good shepherd,” he put his disciples in the humble position of seeing themselves as the sheep. Sheep are considered to be unintelligent animals. They do not have the ability to care for themselves and are totally dependent on the watchful eye of a shepherd. I imagine the disciples did not enjoy being compared to sheep as they discussed the positions they would hold in Christ’s kingdom and their seating arrangement on his right and left hands. I can also imagine their complaints about the reference to unintelligent sheep. One might have argued, “Why couldn’t Jesus have referred to us as being strong as an ox, smart as a fox, or even majestic as an eagle?” Time would prove Jesus’ illustration applicable, and it is fitting for us today as well.

Jesus’ reference to himself as “the gate” shows us that there is no other way to enter God’s kingdom but through him. Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Earlier in 10:7-8, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.”

In our day, the thieves and robbers who enter the sheep pen are false teachers who enter Christian churches and even seminaries. Taking the Scriptures out of context, these false teachers can present a message that “tickles the ears” of an unsuspecting congregation (II Timothy 4:3). “Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute,” writes Peter. “In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping” (II Peter 2:2–3).

Due to the technology we have today, many people believe we are more enlightened than the apostles and prophets were more than 2,000 years ago. They believe

the Scriptures should not be interpreted literally but were written so that those who came before us might more easily understand a complex theology. It has been my observation, however, that technology does not make people more intelligent. Our universities are lowering the criteria to enter their schools due to a lack of qualified people to fill their ranks. In all of this, we are producing a population of people who lack the ability to think critically. When we tie that to the lack of sound biblical teaching, we find more and more people with foolish hearts and depraved minds.

It has also been my observation that we live in a society that demands quick answers to complex questions. Why study history when we can simply ask Google or Siri for the answer? Why study mathematics when calculators and computers can provide us with instant answers? Why study the Word of God when it is much easier to simply believe what someone tells us? This is especially true when they tell us things that align with our sinful nature. It seems we are being conditioned to believe what false teachers proclaim. They would have you believe there are many ways to heaven and that God is love and therefore would never condemn anyone to hell. The Scriptures, however, paint a different picture for us—Jesus Christ alone delivers us from the condemnation of sin and death.

In John 10:3–4, Jesus says, “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.” How many people today know the voice of Jesus? How many people today know the Word of God so intimately that they flee from the voice of a false teacher? If we could only be more like those dependent sheep and recognize our shepherd by sight in the light of day and by his voice in the dark of night. Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Jesus Christ is our good shepherd and deliverer.


*Caouette is a member of Good Shepherd Free Lutheran, Brainerd, Minn.*

# THE LIGHT DELIVERS

BY TOM CAOQUETTE







# They saw the Light

BY LYDIA McCARLSON

“That night some shepherds were in the fields outside the village guarding their flocks of sheep,” I read. “Suddenly an angel appeared among them, and the landscape shone bright with the glory of the Lord. They were frightened.”

Tobias, who had been listening intently as I was reading from Luke 2:8–12 (Living Bible), suddenly interrupted me.

“Did the shepherds run and leave their sheep?”

“No,” I answered. I kept on reading ... “The angel reassured them. ‘Don’t be afraid. I bring you the most joyful news ever announced, and it is for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem. How will you recognize him? You will find a baby wrapped in a blanket, lying in a manger.’”

I closed the Bible and finished telling Tobias the story of the shepherds. They had seen the Light. They returned glorifying and praising God for the visit of the angels, for they had seen the child just as the angel told them.

As I placed the Bible on the table, I noticed the evening shadows approaching. The winter days were becoming shorter and shorter.

“Tobias, please turn on the light.”

“Okay, Grandma,” he answered as he jumped up. The light revealed everything in the room.

“Look!” Tobias exclaimed, “Light is really great!” He paused, then turned to me and quietly asked, “Remember, Grandma, a while ago you said, ‘I was blind, but now I see.’ What did you mean by that?”

I thought back to a few months ago. A cataract had developed on my left eye, and it completely blocked my vision. After the lens implant and the bandages were removed, I was overjoyed. I could see the light again. I continued to explain to Tobias that this is what happens in our lives. Sin blinds us. But the grace and forgiveness of God let us see the light again.

With tears running down my cheeks, I hugged him and said, “God knows what is best for us, and

he loves little children. So have faith in him, and he will not leave you.”

It was Christmas vacation, and Tobias was spending the night with us. When it was bedtime, he timidly asked, “Do you care if I leave the light on? Mom always lets us at home.”

But I had hardly left his room when he called out, “Grandma, I guess I don’t need the light on because God’s light is shining through the window.”

Sure enough, it was a clear, moonlit night. I turned out his light with a smile.

As I left the room again, I thought about a recent devotional we had read in *Our Daily Bread*. “I heard about a little boy who didn’t want to get out of bed one day. He told his parents, ‘I won’t get up until I see Jesus.’ At first, they didn’t know what he meant. But when he pointed to a picture on the wall, which was a painting of Christ, they understood. He wouldn’t get out of bed until it was light enough to see the face of Jesus. That little boy’s remark reminds me that our first thoughts when we wake up to a new day should be directed to the Lord in heaven.”

I went and sat in the living room, where Grandpa was reading the paper. My mind was filled with thoughts about the day. I reflected on the Christmas story: Mary’s blind faith in God’s promise to give her a son, called Jesus ... Joseph’s blind faith to take Mary to be his espoused wife. Joseph and Mary saw the light. The shepherds believed and followed the light. Later, the wise men followed the star to Bethlehem.

I should daily walk in the light. Then, when darkness comes, I will not be afraid. He is there if I call upon him and believe. John 8:12 says, “I am the light of the world: he who follows Me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

*Reprinted from the December 10, 1991, issue of The Lutheran Ambassador. Artwork: “Annunciation to the Shepherds,” by Wallerant Vaillant, after Nicolaes Pietersz Berchem, 1658-1677.*

# Wait Upon the Lord

*"Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him" (Psalm 37:7).*

**D**ear friend, I want to share a memory from my childhood. Our family lived in the country, about 60 kilometers from the nearest town. About twice a year, my parents traveled to that town on several errands. We children knew approximately what time they should return home, and we waited impatiently for their return and the presents they would bring home for us.

While we waited, we climbed up in a tree where each of us had our own lookout. High up in the tree, we kept watch. We could see all the way to the turn before the hill. And when at last we could see the horse and wagon, we came down quickly from the tree. Then we all sprang at once to open the gate. The mud under our feet splashed around as we raced, but we didn't have time to think about it.

Whoever got to the gate first had the honor of opening it. The much-awaited travelers drove into the yard, bringing their large cargo. We eagerly helped unload and got something good as a reward.

Doubtless, you have similar memories from your childhood. Now I wonder if you still have the same childlike anticipation. Do we now, in life's twilight, wait for the Lord's return with the same eagerness as we waited as small children for the return of our parents? Jesus has promised to return. He has said, "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you" (John 14:18). Further on, he has said, "Surely I come quickly" (Revelation 22:20).

If we love Jesus, we wait for his return.

But also, Jesus is with us now. In the Bible, he speaks to us. At the evening meal, he strengthens us with his heavenly presence. He hears our prayers.

But he has also promised to come in another way, in great splendor, accompanied by his holy angels. That will happen at the end of time. When that will be hasn't been revealed to us. He has only said, "Therefore be also ready. For the son of man comes in an hour you don't expect" (Matthew 24:44).

The heart which loves Jesus longs for him. We rejoice at the thought of his return being nearer, just as children are glad that their mother and father will come back from that trip to town.

"... and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

*Jaakko Haavio*

*Haavio was a Finnish pastor, poet, and writer (1904–1984).  
Translated from Finnish to Norwegian by Babben Hoel Paulsen  
and to English by Pastor Raynard Huglen.*





**I** like mysteries, so every now and then, I'll look for a true crime podcast to listen to while I'm driving. Recently, one particular episode left me feeling a bit unsettled. In short, it stirred up a lot of thoughts about the reality that my son will be growing up in a very dark world. As a relatively new dad, I experienced some new emotions in that moment. From there, my mind went to some of the struggles our congregations and pastors face. Struggles, frankly, that remind me of Ephesians 6:12, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Periodically, we get a glimpse into the horror of the thief, who comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. When that happens, it can be frightening, shocking, and agonizing. Now, I don't mean to sound ominous or despairing. However, I do believe that it's important to be honest about the nature of our cosmic struggle and the dreadful intentions of our enemy. Doing so helps us in a few ways.

## THIS SEASON OF WAITING

BY MICAH HJERMSTAD

First, it helps us to sympathize with those who are suffering, to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). I don't know every struggle facing our congregations and pastors, but I know many are hurting. I know the devil is always busy. To those of you in the midst of a storm, please remember that you are not alone. One of the beautiful characteristics of our association is that we exist to encourage one another, to help one another, and to pray for each other. We are with you, and we love you.

Even more, God is with you, he loves you, and he is for you. You see, the other benefit of honesty about our struggle is that it helps us see the only honest solution to our struggle. When we identify the core problem, we see the Christ who came to deal with that problem. He took on the horrors of sin, death, and the devil, and he vanquished our enemy on our behalf.

Isn't that good news? In Romans 8, Paul writes that because God didn't spare his own son in this battle, we can know that he will take care of us, too. The cross reveals the lengths that God was willing to go to save you. In that light, you can rest well, knowing that he will not abandon you now.

We are in the Advent season, and these days of expectant waiting are so meaningful. We know Jesus kept his promise when he came the first time, and we know he promised to come again. And so Advent reminds us every year that we are in a season of waiting for Christ to come again. This season of waiting includes suffering, sometimes severe. In those dark days, remember that your Messiah comes, and he brings salvation, light, and life. Remember that God keeps his promise, and so there is hope, peace, love, and joy in this season of waiting.

And when the calendar hits December 25, celebrate. Rejoice that God became man and brought salvation to you. And celebrate the day as a taste of what the day will bring when he comes again. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "It will be said on that day, 'Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation'" (25:9).

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*Hjermstad is the president of the AFLC.*

## Mexico congregation celebrates Reformation with week of services

AFLC World Missions executive director, board member speak

Members of Gethsemane Lutheran in Celaya, Mexico, hosted a week of services from October 29 through November 2 to mark the anniversary of the Reformation.

Evening services were held Sunday through Thursday. Pastor Milton Flores, who serves the congregation, spoke at one service and also led worship at each service. Guest speakers included representatives from AFLC World Missions. Pastor Earl Korhonen, who is the executive director of AFLC World Missions, spoke at two services. And Pastor Jerry Nelson, who serves on the World Missions Board of Directors, also spoke at two services. Josue Flores, a 2016 graduate of the Free Lutheran Bible College, served as a translator.

The theme of the conference was the third article of the Apostles Creed: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

Pastor Earl and Joan Korhonen and Pastor Jerry and Kristie Nelson also traveled to Jerez, Mexico, Nov. 3–6 to visit AFLC missionaries Pastor Todd and Barb Schierkolk.



Members of Gethsemane congregation celebrate the Reformation (top) with Pastor Jerry Nelson (above) preaching and Josue Flores (above right) translating. Pastor Earl Korhonen (left) is pictured with Delores, a founding member of the congregation.



## Puerto Rico congregation turns 60

Members of Iglesia Evangélica Luterana Resurrección, located in greater San Juan, Puerto Rico, celebrated the congregation's 60th anniversary on Oct. 29. The congregation is served by Pastor Héctor Hiraldo Sosa. Visiting the congregation were Cheri Nelson and Karen Peterson (front row, far right). The congregation also celebrated the anniversary of the Reformation.

## Youth Worker Weekend training

AFLC Youth Ministries will host the annual Youth Workers Weekend Jan. 12–14 at the Association Retreat Center near Osceola, Wis. The featured trainer will be Daniel Keinanen, the FLY Convention coordinator.

The event will begin with a welcome at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Jan. 12, followed by the first training session at 8 p.m. Three training sessions will be offered at 9, 10, and 11 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 13. Coaching sessions will follow in the early afternoon, with a break time for interactive activities. The evening session will begin at 6 p.m. Two sessions will be offered on Sunday morning, closing the weekend retreat at 11 a.m. For more information and to register, visit the Youth Ministries website at [aflc.org/youth](http://aflc.org/youth).



**Event**

Youth Worker Weekends

**Dates**

January 12-14, 2024

**Location:**

Association Retreat Center, near Osceola, Wis.

**Registration**

[aflc.org/youth](http://aflc.org/youth)



# WHO WILL GO FOR US?

BY PASTOR BRENT RAAN

**W**hat is it like to send people you love and care for into a land that carries a risk to their lives and health? This is a question that largely I haven't been affected by, but I have been sent to five different countries to serve in missions. This past year, though, we have felt this tension. We had the awesome opportunity to send those we love and have walked beside in ministry to Malawi, Ethiopia, and South Sudan.

The loved ones we sent were those who have worked with Pastor Nathan Jore since the very birth of the Ambassador Institute in Uganda. And God has been reaping a harvest that goes beyond our wildest dreams. What is God doing? Well, without our group of AFLC missionaries stepping foot

in South Sudan, we now have multiple classes within the country's capital city of Juba and its surrounding area. And a warden of more than ten prisons in Malawi has brought his guards to our biblical Lutheran orality training program. He told his guards that he wants the Ambassador Institute's training program in each of the prisons because it is only through the Bible that lives can be changed and that the people of Malawi can be transformed.

This harvest hasn't come without cost, though. Our friends who went to South Sudan have been mistreated by the authorities. They have also struggled to work in countries where the people speak languages that none of them know. They have had to get used to new foods, hotter weather, and illnesses. When they arrived back in Uganda, they rejoiced that they were back home, but they also had such a burden for the people they met, people who had less than them and were struggling to put food on their tables. They went out and met, prayed for, and played with children. They laughed and cried with those around them. The team didn't have much to give, but they responded like Peter and Paul did with a lame beggar: "Silver and gold we do not have but that which we have we give to you, in the name of



Mamma Rose, Mamma Ann, and Mamma Nissi.

Jesus, get up and walk" (Acts 3:6).

This is what God is doing. He is expanding his kingdom. He is doing exactly what he promised—building his church! Friends, please know that God is at work. So often, we in America can become so distracted by the news and discouraged by wars, shootings, and woke ideology influencing all areas of our lives. May we open our eyes, look at what our brothers and sisters are doing in Africa, and seek to follow their example as they follow that of Christ. Is there someone around you who needs encouragement from the Word of God? Is there someone who needs a listening ear? Is there someone who needs a shoulder to cry on? If so, please go and be an ambassador of Christ, proclaiming his saving grace to the world.

*Raan is an AFLC missionary serving in Gulu, Uganda. The Raan family will be on furlough beginning mid-December.*

## FLBCS faculty, leadership attend ETS annual meeting

The Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary enjoyed several opportunities to present at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting. The event was held Nov. 14–16 in San Antonio, Texas.

Dr. Brent Olson was invited to share his doctoral dissertation on Exodus 14–15 to a group of Old Testament scholars. Dr. Nathan Olson moderated the Lutheran Studies Room, where the conference was able to hear presentations from Dr. Eugene Boe (Lutheran Brethren Seminary), Dr. Joel Biermann (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.), Dr. Gene Veith, Jr. (Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, Ind.), and Dr. Jordan Cooper (American Lutheran Theological Seminary). Pastor Andrew Kneeland also presented a paper on early church history.

Faculty and administration have attended the ETS annual meeting for years as a chance to continue their theological education and rub shoulders with peers and academic leaders. In recent years, though, hosting the Lutheran Studies room has allowed FLBCS to also represent Lutheran theology in the realm of Christian academics, foster friendships, and collaborate with Lutherans from various traditions.

## Upcoming FLBCS events

### Spotlight: Missions

The Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary will host the Spotlight: Missions conference Jan. 30 through Feb. 1. Pastor Nate and Rhoda Jore, AFLC missionaries to Uganda, are the featured speakers for the conference.

### Homecoming

The Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary will host its first homecoming event Feb. 2–3. Events will include cheering on the men's and women's basketball teams, brunch, and pep band and alumni choir performance.

## Support the AFLC's magazine

The AFLC's monthly magazine, *The Lutheran Ambassador*, is free for all subscribers. The ministry is subsidized by your gifts. Contact [lasubscriptions@afcl.org](mailto:lasubscriptions@afcl.org) for more information on giving to our ministry. Or, visit our website at [afcl.org/lutheran-ambassador](http://afcl.org/lutheran-ambassador).

## FLBCS hires faculty member

Hylden will start his new role in June 2024

Members of the Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary Board of Trustees announced that Dr. Jarrod Hylden, Beresford, S.D., has accepted the call to serve as full-time faculty beginning June 1, 2024. Dr. Hylden will teach classes in both the Bible College and the Seminary programs.



Hylden currently serves Skrefsrud Lutheran, Beresford, S.D., and Immanuel Free Lutheran, Centerville, S.D. Originally from Park River, N.D., Hylden is a graduate of both the Bible College ('07) and Seminary ('15). He earned a Doctor of Ministry degree with a concentration in New Testament Exposition from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2022.

"I hope to help students grow in their ability to interpret God's Word, apply it to their lives, and teach it to others," said Hylden. "As we study God's Word together, we will see how all Scripture points to Jesus Christ and his saving work. I am so grateful for this opportunity."

Hylden is married to Elise (Parsley). Together, they have five children: Winnie (7), August (5), Peter (4), Fiona (2), and Luella (5 months).

"Dr. Hylden is a gifted teacher and scholar who is passionate about helping our students grow in their relationship with Christ and knowledge of His Word," said Dr. James Molstre, FLBCS chief academic officer. "He will be a valuable asset to our schools."

## Seminary Symposium will focus on ethics

A Seminary Symposium is scheduled for Jan. 17–19 on the campus of the Free Lutheran Seminary in Plymouth, Minn., with the theme "Ethics."

Guest instructors will include Dr. Joel Biermann (professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis), who will teach a session on "The Three Estates and the Christian Life" and "Virtue Ethics and the Church." Pastor Micah Klemme, Starbuck, Minn., will teach on "Ethics and the Body." Pastor Nick Schultz of Chamberlain, S.D., will teach on "The Psalms and Christian Ethics." And Dr. Nathan Olson, faculty, will teach on "The Rise and Fall of Lutheran Pietism."

A dinner reception and opening session led by Dr. Wade Mobley, FLBCS president, will open the symposium on Wednesday evening.

The symposium will conclude on Jan. 19 with the Georg Sverdrup Society Forum. Presenters will include Loiell Dyrud, Thief River Falls, Minn.; Pastor



Terry Olson, Grafton, N.D.; and Pastor Steve Mundfrom, faculty.

Registration will be available on the FLBC website, with options for sessions and meals to purchase.

- For more information visit [flbc.edu/symposium-2024](http://flbc.edu/symposium-2024)



# WMF

WOMEN'S  
MISSIONARY  
FEDERATION

## DISTRICT RALLY UPDATES

BY ANNE PRESTENG

**“P**roclaim His Salvation and Declare His Glory!” was the theme for the Eastern North Dakota District WMF Rally held at Ebenezer Lutheran in Northwood, N.D. Pastor Matthew and Ednay Abel, along with their children Zoey, Ian, and Boaz, shared with more than 70 ladies who attended the rally.

Matthew and Ednay, AFLC missionaries sent to Paraguay in 2015, shared the challenges they face and updates on current ministry work. Zoey asked her dad if she could also share. How precious it was to hear her 5-year-old voice as she told us about kid’s club and Sunday morning worship. Ian, age 3, and Zoey sang “Thy Word” in Spanish and English.

“Missions is what we do,” related Matthew as he shared about his whole family reaching out to their neighbors and friends with the message that Jesus loves them and came to save them. From Psalm 96:2, “Sing to the Lord, praise his name, proclaim his salvation day after day,” he shared that God is holy and set apart. Verse 5 contrasts the gods of the nations (idols) and our Lord who made heaven and earth. The gods of the nations are clearly visible in Paraguay, said Matthew, where owning physical shrines and praying to the saints is common practice. He said that priests bless household idols to make them effective when hearing prayers. Often, people are offended by the truth that Jesus is the true and only way to God. Cultural resistance to change is great.

While praying to shrines seems like an obvious form of idolatry to us, our subtle idolatry is equally sinful, said Matthew. Any priority over God is idolatry. Jesus tells us in Luke 14:26 that love for Jesus must come even before our families. As we pray for God to open other hearts, it is good to remember our own hearts and our need for God to open our eyes to our own sin.

*Presteng, a member of Bethel Free Lutheran, Grafton, N.D., in the Eastern North Dakota District, is the first vice president of the WMF.*

BY BONNIE HANDSAKER

**I** have been blessed in many ways by attending WMF rallies. The first blessing was my mother-in-law’s encouragement for me to go with her more than 30 years ago. I did go with her, and though the traveling was sometimes long, the conversation was great, and the speakers at the rallies always blessed us.

The second blessing was the new friends we met back then—friends we see even now when we go to a district rally. My heart is so blessed to walk into a host church and see my good friends that I only see at AFLC gatherings.

The third blessing has been the speakers. At our most recent fall rally, Pastor Matthew Pillman and his family shared about the new church plant beginning in Ankeny, Iowa. We titled our day “Planted” and focused on Isaiah 61:3b, “They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord.” We are privileged to have this new church plant in our district. Most of us have never been a part of a church plant.

I was challenged in two ways. First, how can I be firmly planted “like a tree firmly planted by streams of water” (Psalm 1:3)? Second, how can we come alongside the Pillman family in prayer? And as a congregation, as my church is the closest AFLC congregation to Ankeny, how might we encourage them visibly? They have named this church Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” We pray for God’s blessing in this endeavor.

*Handsaker is a member of Salem Lutheran, Radcliffe, Iowa, which is part of the Cenral Tri-State District.*

PEOPLE & PLACES

**Pastor Steve Carlson**, Pittsburgh, Pa., has accepted a call to serve Peace Lutheran, Canal Winchester, Ohio.

**Pastor Seth Moan** was installed Oct. 15 at Calvary Free Lutheran, Arlington, S.D., with Pastor Gary Jorgenson, vice president of the AFLC, officiating.

**Pastor James Scott Pierson**, a 2023 graduate of the Free Lutheran Seminary, was installed Oct. 29 at the Trinity Lutheran Parish (St. Paul Lutheran, Dodge, N.D., and Golgotha Lutheran, Golden Valley, N.D.) with Pastor Micah Hjermstad, AFLC president, officiating.

**Pastor Matthew Nelson** was installed Nov. 19 at St. Paul's Lutheran, Fargo, N.D., with Pastor Micah Hjermstad officiating.

**Seth Larson**, a 2018 graduate of the Free Lutheran Bible College, is serving as pastor of Lisbon Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran, Newark, Ill.

Members of **Cross and Crown Lutheran**, Montebello, Calif., have called Pastor Per Anderson as their pastor.

**Rodney Stueland**, 85, a former AFLC lay pastor who served congregations in Kenyon, Roseau, and Newfolden, Minn.; Buxton, N.D.; and Roslyn, S.D., died Nov. 6 in Fargo, N.D. Services were held Nov. 17 at Liberty Lutheran Brethren, Fargo, N.D.

**Pastor Jim Ritter**, Shakopee, Minn., was removed from the AFLC clergy roster by the Coordinating Committee at his own request.

**Pastor Ben Jore**, San Marcos, Texas, was removed from the AFLC clergy roster by the Coordinating Committee at his own request.

**Pastor Ron Brubakken**, Osceola, Wis., was moved to the retired clergy roster by the Coordinating Committee at his own request.

**Correction:** Angie Lombardo, author of the WMF's 2024 Bible study, as referenced in the November issue's WMF column, is a member of Helmar Lutheran, Newark, Ill.



FLBC Concert Choir to tour Scandinavia

Members of the Free Lutheran Bible College Concert Choir will travel to Scandinavia for a spring tour from April 28 through May 18. The tour will include a week of stops in the Faroe Islands and Denmark before spending two weeks traveling through Norway. The choir will visit a Lutheran Bible school and churches in Stavanger before working their way up the North Sea coast, where members of the Companion Tour will meet them in Bergen.

The Companion Tour is a unique opportunity to travel with like-minded individuals to worship the Lord and glorify him together in other parts of the world. It is an opportunity for donors, supporters, and parents to experience firsthand the ministry of the choir. Tour participants come alongside the choir

with support and encouragement and participate in relationship-building throughout the tour.

Working with tour manager Adam Lee, the Scandinavia Companion Tour will take place May 6–18, joining the FLBC Concert Choir for their final 10 days in Norway. There will be stops for choir concerts and sightseeing, including Bergen, Trondheim, Oslo, and the hometown of Hans Nielsen Hauge to honor the 200th anniversary of his death and also celebrate Norwegian Independence Day.

Traveling with the choir will be Choir Director Andrew Hanson and FLBC Dean Pastor Adam Osier. For more information about the tour and to donate to its costs, visit online at [flbc.org/scandinaviatour](http://flbc.org/scandinaviatour).

AFLC BENEVOLENCES January 1-October 31, 2023

FUND	REC'D IN OCTOBER	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	PRIOR YEAR-TO-DATE
General Fund	\$37,389	\$351,201	\$359,268
Evangelism	8,531	93,056	104,249
Youth Ministries	7,027	108,627	127,155
Parish Education	13,957	124,196	141,962
Seminary	20,901	219,873	194,257
Bible College	32,918	323,692	380,997
Home Missions	35,916	260,275	319,262
World Missions	57,894	327,988	380,099
WM Personal Support	74,916	619,203	604,578
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>\$289,449</b>	<b>\$2,428,112</b>	<b>\$2,611,827</b>

For additional financial information for each department, go to [www.aflc.org/giving](http://www.aflc.org/giving)

OCTOBER MEMORIALS

**Bible College**

Ruth Claus  
Annette Fagerberg

**Seminary**

Annie May Johnson  
Alice Balmer

**Home Missions**

Benjamin Copes

# JESUS' BIRTH CHANGED EVERYTHING

Many of us in the Midwest are breaking out our shovels and seat warmers, colorful lights line many of our roofs, and pumpkin spice season is thankfully in the rear-view mirror. It's Christmas time, and in a few short weeks we will be reading Luke 2 while sitting around decorated trees.



Pastor Andrew Kneeland

The Christmas story is a familiar one, even to many nonbelievers, but it's worth reflecting on again. The birth of Jesus changed everything.

Let's think about a few parts of that familiar Christmas story:

*4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.*

Joseph, the man chosen to be the earthly parent of Jesus, was a descendant of King David. A lot had happened in Israel since those days of judges and kings, but God had not forgotten his promise to his people. "I will raise up your offspring after you," God told David in II Samuel 7 through the prophet Nathan, "who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom." And later: "I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

In one sense, this prophecy was referring to David's son, Solomon. But in a greater, fuller sense, this prophecy was about Jesus. Jesus was a son of David, and when he was born, he established a kingdom that will last forever.

There have been many kings and kingdoms throughout Israel's history. Some trusted in God's promises, and some did not, but even the most faithful king and established kingdom passed away. The

kingdom of heaven will never pass away; King Jesus, of the house and line of David, will rule and reign forever. All things will forever be under his control and authority, and he will remain on his throne through any circumstance or event.

*7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

I think this verse is one of the most remarkable in all of the Bible. Of all the ways for the eternal and all-powerful God to enter his creation, he chose a dirty and lowly manger. His creative voice spoke stars and planets into existence, but he became a tiny infant, the firstborn son of a poor couple from Nazareth. He deserved the softest bed and the most luxurious palace, but Jesus was born in a manger.

God became a man because that's what we needed him to do. And his birth was humble and lowly because his task was to serve, not to be served. He deserved a bed of roses, but he chose a cross of wood.

Christmas is a happy, joyous time where we rightly celebrate Christ's birth, but even from the moment Jesus entered the world as an infant, he had his eyes on the cross. When the Savior of the world was born in that manger and wrapped in those swaddling cloths, the world learned what kind of savior Jesus was.

*14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

The angels had a front-row seat to this cosmic drama of God's rescue plan.

They watched in awe as God created man, woman, and the world. Tears streamed down their faces as they saw sin enter the world and break humanity's relationship with God. They listened to the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament with hope and anticipation, waiting for the long-expected arrival of Jesus.

Jesus arrived on Christmas morning. And his birth changed everything. The waiting of the angels changed to celebration, and mankind's broken relationship with their Maker was restored.

The angels knew there was a chasm of nothingness between us and God—an unbridgeable gap, a bottomless canyon. But on Christmas morning, our God bridged

*Of all the ways for the eternal and all-powerful God to enter his creation, he chose a dirty and lowly manger.*

the unbridgeable to bring peace where there had been war. From that lowly manger, Jesus began his path toward our salvation. For us and for our salvation, he "made peace by the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20) and "destroyed the one who has the power of death" (Hebrews 2:14).

The angels had been waiting for this moment and now celebrated with the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem. God's perfect plan was being fulfilled.

The Christmas story is familiar to most of us. But when your church or family reads Luke 2 again this year, don't let familiarity breed complacency. No matter how many times you've read it before, remember that the birth of Jesus changed everything!

*something to share*

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# GOD'S SHEER GENEROSITY

BY ANDREA CHRISTENSON

**O**

nce, when our children were small, we ate out at a local pizza place. The restaurant was quiet that day, and we weren't seated near anyone.

My husband and I were tired but trying to engage with our kids. We laughed a lot and ate a ton of pepperoni and black olive pizza. We drew games on the coloring pages, dropped a few things on the floor, and drank a sea of water and diet Coke.

Finally, though, we tapped out. I surveyed the damage to the table and floor while my husband surveyed the damage to our checkbook. He reached for his wallet while I reached for the dirty napkins we'd scattered.

Just then, the waitress came over. "Don't worry about your bill," she said. "Someone took care of it."

Looking around at the table, and me half bent over to pick up the stray utensils that had somehow ended up under my daughter's chair, she continued, "Don't

worry about the mess either. Just leave it. We're not busy. Someone will clean it up."

As I left the restaurant, I looked back. Our canceled bill lay crumpled on the table amidst the detritus we'd left behind. A white-shirted busboy began to clear the used plates and water-stained coloring pages.

We walked away free, the cost of our lunch and our litter completely covered by someone else. No one expected a thank you; our lunch patron remained anonymous. They'd even paid a generous tip, keeping the wait staff in good spirits.

The mess that our tired little family made, the price of our meal, and the effort to bring it to us were all taken care of through no works or deeds of our own. What a beautiful picture of propitiation.

Romans 3:21–25 reminds us, "But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in

Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed ..."

Through Christ's sacrifice, God passes over our sins. He has brought us out from under the law and into his righteousness.

God invites us to leave the guilt of our sin behind. Leave your crumpled napkins, the ruined papers where you colored outside of the lines, your spilled food, and your stains. Forget your debt, your disgrace, and your shame. Don't look back as you walk with him into freedom.

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*Christenson is a member of Solid Rock Free Lutheran, Anoka, Minn.*