



Christmas carols.

There can be no question that God values music. I'll bet most of us could recite a Bible verse or two that speaks of singing to God, praising God, or making music for God. Many of these passages are found in the Psalms! The Psalms are a collection of prayers and praises that help us give voice to our confessions, our emotions, and our thankfulness.

Psalm 150, as a concluding doxology to this musical book, says: "Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!"

Do you get the point? We can praise our God through music and song. We see a similar truth in Ezra 3. After the foundation of the temple had been laid and reconstruction was officially under way, the priests led the people to praise and worship the God who had brought them back from captivity and who was re-establishing his presence among them.



"And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, 'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.' And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid" (v. 11).

We sing to confess our sins, to build us together as God's people, and to praise our Savior for his grace and mercy. Christmas is a good time to sing. We're getting to the "Christmas carols" time of the year, and many of these familiar hymns are excellent ways to praise our God. In this issue, we will take a closer look at six of these familiar Christmas hymns. Though he passed away several years ago, we've included an article in this issue that Pastor Oliver Olson penned for *The Lutheran Ambassador* back in 2004. His focus on the hymn "What Child is This?" helps us reflect on that baby in a manger. Ann-Marie Graffunder helps us see the paradox in the God of the universe coming to such meager circumstances by writing about the hymn "Once in Royal David's City."

Gracia Gilbertson calls us to gather at the manger and behold this remarkable child by writing about the hymn, "O Come All Ye Faithful." Leeanna Lunn writes about the angelic choir that assembled in Bethlehem on that first Christmas night by writing about the carol "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Pastor Paul Kneeland writes about the joy we, too, can have from the Christmas story by looking at "Joy to the World."

Pastor Matthew Pillman closes the series by writing about the missional carol, "Go! Tell it on the Mountain." The baby in the manger is not news we should keep to ourselves. Christ became man for all mankind!

In this year-end issue, we are also wrapping up our regular columns. Pastor Joe Larson writes about the promise and hope of our resurrected bodies in the last "In the Word" column for the year. Thank you to each pastor who has taken us through Bible studies on these sections from I Corinthians. We will take up a different portion of Scripture in 2025. Stay tuned!

Also in this issue, Kirstie Skogerboe concludes her "Something to Share" column. Kirstie is an excellent wordsmith, and we're grateful for her encouraging and edifying columns this year.

We pray this issue is helpful and encouraging to you. As always, please let me know if you have any feedback or ideas for The Lutheran Ambassador.

-Pastor Andrew Kneeland



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Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! [Psalm 95:1–2]



Music is one of the fairest and most glorious gifts of God.

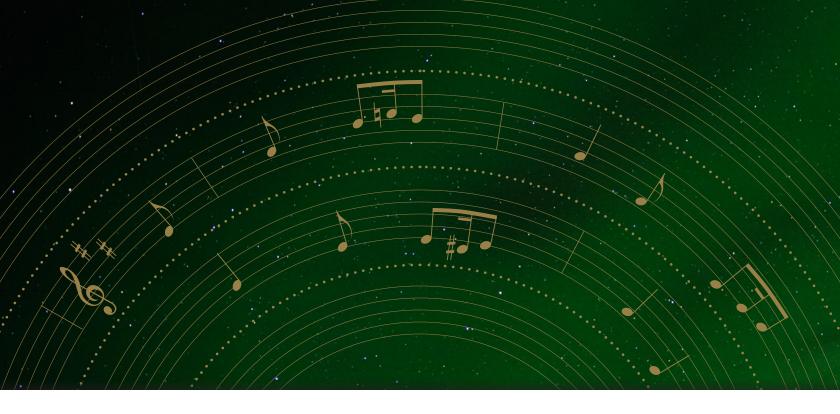
[Martin Luther]

The promises of God for tomorrow are the anchor for believers today. [R.C. Sproul]

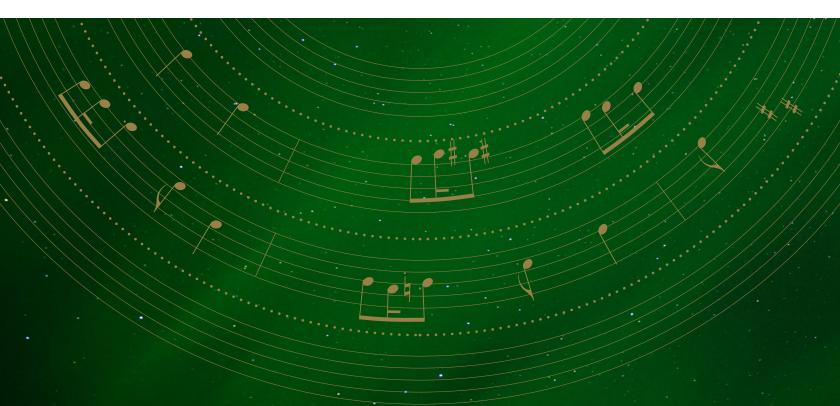
The greatest joy in this life is to know that our greatest joy is not in this life. [Burk Parsons]

It is only of unmerited mercy that any is redeemed, and only in well-merited judgment that any is condemned. [Augustine]

The central basis of Christian assurance is not how much our hearts are set on God, but how unshakably his heart is set on us. [Timothy Keller]







icture this: A Christmas scene in a make-believe barn, with little children dressed in costume to replicate the first Christmas. There is an innocent Joseph standing by a seated angelic-faced Mary, overlooking a small crib—make that "manger." Youthful shepherds are adoringly looking on, and in the near distance are cardboard figures of a cow, a donkey, a lamb or lambs. And, of course, three wise men are kneeling in reverence before the Holy Babe, offering their exquisite gifts, while singing, "We Three Kings of Orient Are."

Sound familiar? Yes, and it makes for a meaningful Christmas observance in a Sunday school program setting.

Yet, the harsh reality of what really happened that first Christmas is often lost in the warm glow of nostalgia and tradition.

Our blessed Lord Jesus Christ was born into a very hostile world. Galatians 4:4–5 says: "In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that He might redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons."

But how God did it was absolutely amazing, stranger than the fiction that often surrounds this event.

It all began with a visitation by the angel Gabriel to Mary on that wonderful day. The greatest announcement of all time came to Mary, a young adolescent of perhaps 15 years of age, from a traced heritage but with little or no social standing or political clout.

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God; and, behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord will give him the throne of his father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:30–33).

What a fantastic, awesome announcement! For 4,000 years, every godly woman secretly hoped that somehow she might be the mother of the seed of the woman that would crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15), as promised to our first mother, Eve, back in the Garden of Eden.

What would any of us have done had we been the one to receive such an announcement? Surely, we would have shared the news with any listening ear. But Mary kept all this to herself and meditated on it in her heart. Not even Joseph knew. For the Scripture tells us: "Her husband Joseph, being a just man and not willing to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly" (Matthew 1:19).

All Joseph knew was that his beloved Mary was with a child who was not his. An angel appeared to Joseph to reveal the situation to him.

The angel told him, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a

Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20–21).

As the pregnancy drew close to the end, Mary and Joseph, knowing that the child (the Messiah) was to be born in Bethlehem, waited in Nazareth until God put it in the mind of Caesar Augustus to activate the journey to Bethlehem for the purpose of taxation enrollment. What trusting character on the part of both Mary and Joseph to wait for God's perfect timing! They were an amazing young couple. How unlike the way we might have handled the situation.

Even the journey itself was fraught with peril—no soft cushion for Mary riding sidesaddle on a gentle donkey. They probably walked the 70–80 miles to Bethlehem. As the story from Luke 2:6–7 states: "While they were there, the time came for her to be delivered, and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling bands, and laid him in a manger."

What child is this? The announcement of his birth was not given to the heads of state or to the local media, but to humble shepherds "out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night" (Luke 2:8). And what an announcement that was by the angel! "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy ... for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10–11).

What child is this? The shepherds must have wondered. The confirmation came from an angel of the Lord, no less, to give the greatest legitimacy to the truth of the event. The whole heavenly host joined the angel in praising God, for now they, too, understood what child this was.

Later in the temple, where Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus at the age of 8 days, for the purpose of the circumcision dedication, it was old Simeon and Anna who confirmed that "this, this is Christ the King, the babe the son of Mary," as noted in the familiar Christmas carol.

So, what do these awesome events mean to us, who live this side of the familiar story? We, who often reflect only the tradition and the sweetness of the Christmas story? For the harsh reality of the Babe of Bethlehem became—in a few years—the cross of Calvary. Then, considering this, we are prompted to say with Pilate, "Behold the Man!" (John 19:5).

What child is this? Yes, the Babe in Bethlehem, but also the One on the cross who, shortly, would leave the tomb empty. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Olson, an AFLC pastor who lived in Spring Valley, Calif., passed away in August 2018. This article is reprinted from the December 2004 issue.





BY PASTOR PAUL KNEELAND

oy to the World," one of the most beloved Christmas carols, proclaims a message of deep joy and hope, not only for the birth of Christ but for his reign and ultimate return. Penned by Isaac Watts and inspired by Psalm 98, this hymn points to both Christ's first coming and his second coming, when his redemptive work will see its eternal fulfillment. This dual emphasis helps us understand the profound joy we experience as believers: a joy that is rooted in the certainty of Christ's redemptive mission: past, present, and future.

A PRESENT REALITY

The carol begins with the triumphant declaration, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come." Notice the present tense: "is come," not "has come." This is significant, as it reminds us that Christ's coming is not just a past event but an ongoing reality. Psalm 98 calls all creation to "make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!" because the Lord has come and reigns even now.

In this present reality of Christ's reign, we are called to prepare our hearts: "Let every heart prepare Him room." As Romans 8:22–23 reminds us, the whole creation groans, waiting for the redemption of God's children. We, too, groan, but not in despair—our hearts are being prepared for the joy of his coming again. It's a call to live expectantly, aligning our lives with his sovereign rule even as we eagerly await his return.

CREATION'S RESPONSE

The second verse proclaims the completeness of Christ's reign: "Let men their songs employ, while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy." Creation itself joins in the celebration, mirroring the sentiment of Romans 8:19–21, which speaks of creation's eager longing to be set free from the curse of sin. As we sing, we join in praising God for the redemption that has begun and will one day be fully realized. The joy we experience now is just a foretaste of the joy that will come when Christ returns to make all things new.

THE CURSE REVERSED

A striking line in the third verse of the carol says, "No more let sin and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found." This is a direct reference

to the curse pronounced in Genesis 3:14–19, where sin brought pain, toil, and death into the world. But where sin once abounded, grace abounds all the more (Romans 5:20–21). Through Christ's redemptive work, the curse is being reversed. His blessings will extend as "far as the curse is found." No part of creation, no aspect of our lives, is beyond the reach of his redemption. When Christ returns, sin and sorrow will be no more, and the people of God, fully restored, will live in perfect harmony with their Creator.

TRUTH AND GRACE

The final verse declares, "He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love." Christ's reign is not limited to one group of people; his redemptive invitation extends to all nations. Jews and Gentiles alike will experience the glories of his righteousness and the wonders of his love. At Christmas, we celebrate the first coming of Christ, when God's promise to send a Savior was fulfilled. But as we sing this hymn, we also look forward to the completion of that promise—the second coming of Christ, when his glorious righteousness and wondrous love will be fully displayed to all.

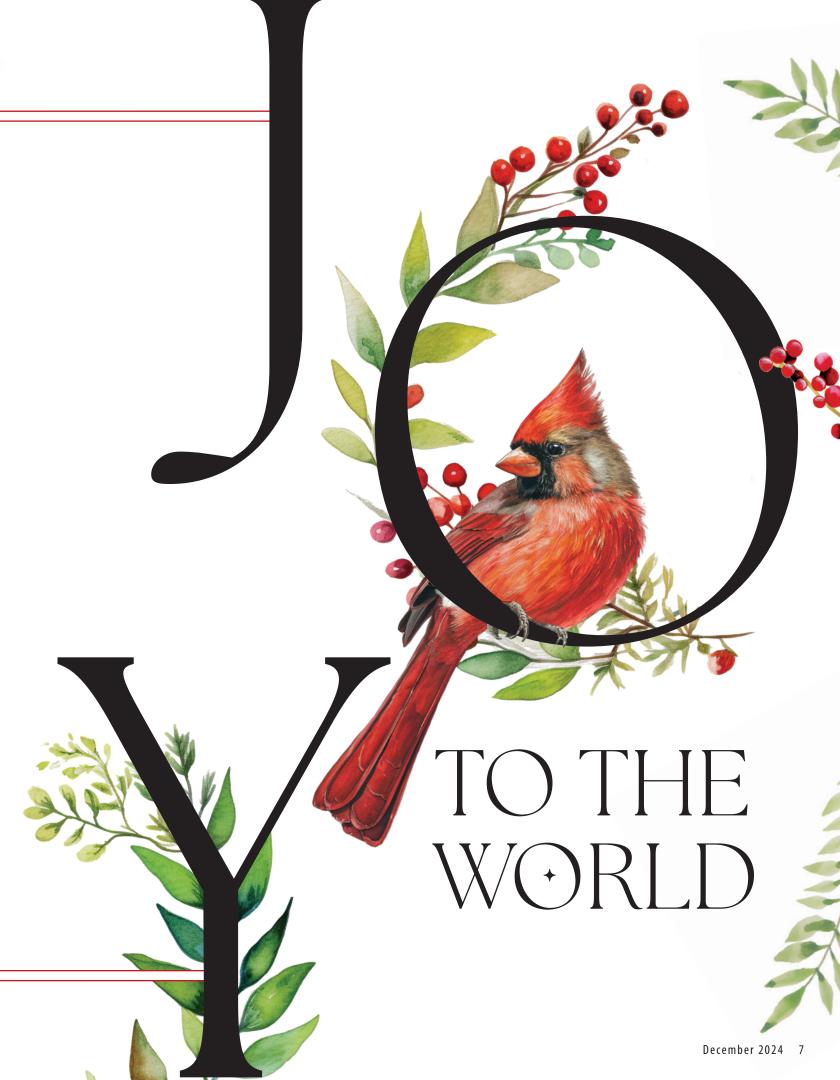
ONE GRAND STORY OF REDEMPTION

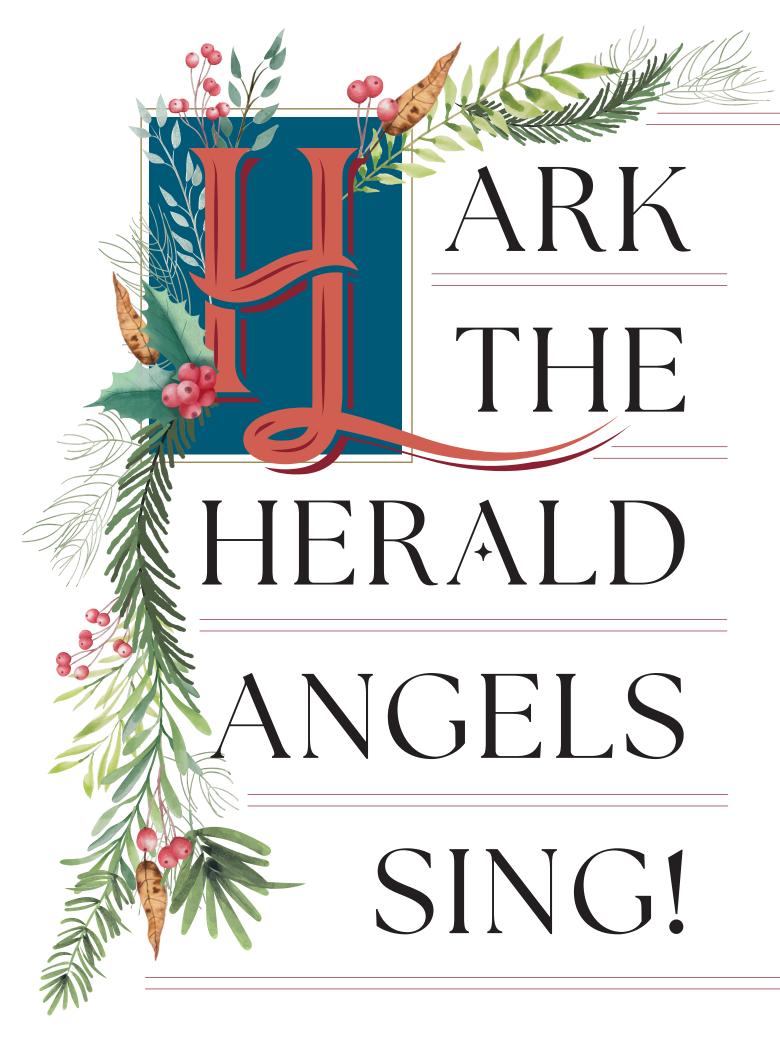
"Joy to the World" is more than a Christmas hymn. It tells the story of redemption—God's grand plan to restore what was lost in the fall. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible paints a picture of a world under the curse of sin, but also a world that is being redeemed by Christ. The joy we experience is knowing that Christ has come and will come again.

As we sing this carol during the Christmas season, let us remember that we are part of this story. We live in the "in between," rejoicing in Christ's first coming while we long for his second. Our hearts are being prepared for the day when "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and ... as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons and daughters, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:21, 23). Until that day, we proclaim the truth and grace of our Savior, and we repeat the sounding joy to all the world.

Kneeland, a member of Veritas Church, Prescott Valley, Ariz., is a missionary with International Orality Inst.









BY LEEANNA LUNN

ne hundred and eighty years ago, the famous composer Felix Mendelssohn wrote a tune and immediately declared it unfit for sacred use. And yet, out of all of his music, it became the biggest blessing to the Church, as it is sung by believers around the world.

It is well understood among Christians that we are to give God our best. But the reality is so much more than that: we are to give him our *all*. He asks for our best *and* our worst, our sacred *and* our secular, our beauty *and* our shame. The promise states, "And we know that for those who love God *all things* work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28, emphasis mine). God really means all things, even our failures, our shortcomings, and yes, even our sin.

In comparison with famous preachers, self-sacrificing missionaries, and gifted evangelists, we can easily find ourselves viewing our lives as not enough for God. But in this we forget that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God" (II Corinthians 4:7). The less the world sees in us, the more God's glory shines.

Remember how God used a teenage shepherd boy to slay the giant and the most insignificant man in all of Israel—once found hiding in a wine press—to bring God's people to victory. The "Offspring of a Virgin's womb" came from a poor girl from the most despised city in the country to bear the Son of God. The angelic hosts proclaimed, "Christ is born in Bethlehem," to lowly shepherds shivering in the cold.

Even more so, remember how God used the jealousy of twelve brothers to save nations from starvation; the hardness of a pharaoh's heart to demonstrate God's power over the Egyptian gods; and the tyranny of a king afraid for his throne to fulfill a 600-year-old prophecy about the "heaven-born Prince of Peace."

God uses it all. In the Kingdom of Heaven, there is no "not enough;" there's just "redeemed." When all of our works—those seemingly beautiful and those anything but—are "as filthy rags" in comparison with what Christ has done for us on the cross, we can rest assured God isn't judging us by them anymore.

God's favorite way to bring the gospel has *always* been through ordinary people. Even those pastors, missionaries,

and evangelists we so like to put up on pedestals are just ordinary people God has called to do extraordinary things. Everything, by the power of the Holy Spirit, will become extraordinary.

God uses little old ladies way past reading and writing, let alone leading Sunday school, to storm the gates of hell with their faithful prayers for the saints. God uses the farmer in the sticks to feed his starving children across the country, and sometimes, across the world. God uses the toddler with Down syndrome to show his Church what it means to "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials" (James 1:2). God uses the mother struggling to hear two words of the sermon over the din of her children's joyful shenanigans to raise the next generation of the Church. God uses the tired and burned-out pastor to demonstrate that the real power comes not from hours of preparation or fancy preaching techniques but from the power of the Word that promises never to return void. God uses the single mother to teach us how tirelessly he works to provide all our needs. God uses us all.

And, somehow, in a way that makes no sense to us now and by no means lessens the pain, God will also use the things that break our hearts: the ugly divorce, the cancerridden child, the death of a husband, the closing of a church, the oppressive depression. He *promises* to use it all for the good of those who love him and to bring about his glory.

Christ "by highest heaven adored" gladly laid "His glory by" and was born "that man no more may die." He walked with us as "Jesus, our Immanuel," immersing himself in our hurts, our shames, and our shortcomings. He was "pleased with us in flesh to dwell," all so that he could "give us second birth." He isn't shocked, surprised, or disappointed with you. He loves you just as you are. And all of the most important work you could have done is already done by him and acquitted to you.

So bring Jesus your all: your hurts, your shames, your sins, as well as your best. It is all redeemed by the blood he shed and is on the verge of turning into something more beautiful than we could have ever imagined. Let us bring him our all and "with th' angelic host proclaim: 'Glory to the newborn King!"

Lunn, who serves on the AFLC Parish Education Board, is a member of Word of Life Free Lutheran, Upsala, Minn.

BY GRACIA GILBERTSON

O Come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant! Come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem; Come and behold Him, born the King of Angels: O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

love the invitation in these beloved lyrics, beckoning us with a sense of excitement to join others in worship. Isn't it true that experiences of worship are typically richer when shared with other believers—the *faithful*? The words reflect almost a childlike wonder, as when a child sees something extraordinary, grabs your hand, and says, "Come and see!" And what does a loving parent do but stop what he or she is doing to look, to *behold*, whatever the child is fascinated with? I would like to just focus on several words that resonate with me as I sing these lyrics.

The bidding to "come" is used many times in Scripture. In the Old Testament we read in Isaiah 55:1, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters ..." and in Psalm 95:6, "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our maker." Jesus himself extended this word of invitation many times as he ministered to people in his three years on earth. To the disciples he said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). To the seeking, he said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37). To the hurting, he said, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavyladen, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). How often do we as believers extend that kind of welcome to those we meet?

Several years ago, I read Randy Newman's book *Unlikely Converts: Improbable Stories of Faith and What They Teach Us About Evangelism.* The common thread in many of these conversion stories was that one person in their lives persisted in inviting them to some sort of Christian gathering, a church service, or a Bible study. I was so challenged by realizing how quickly I give up in extending invitations when someone initially turns me down. Like this beloved carol, I want to be the kind of person who extends the invitation to come over and over.

The word "behold" appears often in Scripture.

Behold literally means "to be sure to see" or "don't miss this." Isn't this our desire for all those we know or encounter who don't yet know Jesus as their Savior—that they would behold him and turn to him in repentance, be redeemed, and join us in adoration and praise? Our world is full of many faiths or ideologies that are not in line with Christianity. Yet, I think of the words of Madeline L'Engle, who said, "We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it."

The word "adore" also has such a rich meaning. One definition I found said that adore means "to regard with the utmost esteem, love, respect; honor," and another said adore is "an attitude of worship characterized by love and reverence towards God." The Latin English Study Bible translates Psalm 29:2 in this way: "Bring to the Lord, glory and honor. Bring to the Lord, glory for his name. Adore the Lord in his holy court." The thought of adoring the Christ child depicted in this carol is such a vivid picture. I think of the way a parent gazes at their newborn child, loving and adoring this new little life. I think of the way we typically picture the scene of Jesus' birth, with Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, later the wise men, and the angels, perhaps unseen, all looking at Jesus, knowing he is their long-promised Savior.

Lastly, I love the lyrics that denote such gladness as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, like "Joyful and triumphant," and in later verses, "Sing in exultation," and "Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, Born this happy morning." The lyrics just infuse one with joy! No matter what trials we are dealing with in our lives, we can rejoice in the birth of our Savior and sing songs of praise to him, giving him all the glory due his name. May the wonder of the incarnation never cease to amaze us that Jesus, the "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing," came to earth to save us from our sins. May we, in this wonderful season of Advent, keep our focus on Jesus and invite others to come and adore him with us.

Gilbertson lives in Leavenworth, Wash.







BY ANN-MARIE GRAFFUNDER

nce upon a time in a land far away ... Such an opening invites the reader, in childlike curiosity, to listen to a wonderful story. In somewhat similar fashion, the Christmas hymn "Once in Royal David's City" opens with an introduction to the best of stories: the news of the birth of the Lord Jesus. It begins, "Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle shed, where a mother laid her baby in a manger for His bed; Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ her little child."

The text of this hymn was written by a woman named Cecil F. Alexander (née Humphreys), and indeed, it was written for children. It was one of 13 poems she wrote to aid in teaching and explaining the Apostle's Creed, primarily to children in the home or Sunday school. Her collection, called Hymns for Little Children, was published in 1848. This hymn lovingly teaches the truth, as stated in the creed, that our Lord Jesus was "born of the Virgin Mary." The music for her verses was written about a year later by Henry J. Gauntlett, a renowned organist and composer at the time. There is a deep, quiet beauty to this simple hymn. Sometimes that which is simple is the most profound.

The second verse of the hymn tells us that "He came down to earth from heaven, Who is God and Lord of all," and that he lived with the poor and lowly. Verse three tells of Jesus being "mild, obedient, and good" in childhood. While the view of how children should behave was somewhat different in the era when this was written, we are all called to be obedient to the Lord. No matter our age, we are God's children. In verse four, we are reminded that "he was little, weak, and helpless," which, as a human infant, he truly was. How amazing that God would humble himself to take on this state of vulnerability! Verse four also says that he knew tears and smiles and that he feels our sadness and shares our gladness. I find this very comforting.

However, the instruction of "Once in Royal David's City" goes beyond the beginning of Jesus' earthly life and his virgin birth. In the fifth and sixth verses, we begin to glimpse the future that believers will have as they see Jesus in his heavenly glory. Verse five says,

"And our eyes at last shall see Him through His own redeeming love, for that Child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heav'n above." It is only because of his redemptive death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection that we will have this future. Verse six reminds us that he will be "set at God's right hand on high." Then we will truly experience his overwhelming beauty and holiness.

When I think of this hymn, I hear in my head the choir of King's College, Cambridge, England, performing this hymn as the processional to their Christmas Eve broadcast. They have made this their tradition for more than 100 years. Set in the royal, opulent, and majestic King's College Chapel, this simple hymn is sung in the most stately and beautiful manner. That particular setting of the hymn is an arrangement by Dr. Arthur Henry Mann, which begins with a simple solo and grows to the full majesty of choir, congregation, and organ—a musical moment that brings a bit of heaven to earth. It seems to portray the paradox that the King of kings came to earth in the simplest of human circumstances, yet some day we will see him in greater beauty than we can imagine.

As I consider this hymn and its significance, I gain a deeper appreciation for these verses. I will reflect more fully on those words this Christmas season as I remember that the baby in the manger was God himself. I want to honor him in the way that I sing or play "Once in Royal David's City." For those who may not know this hymn, I would encourage you to view online a Kings College performance on Christmas Eve 2023 to experience some of that inspiring and beautiful interpretation of this hymn. However, whether we sing it with many worshipers and majestic instrumentation or just a few people in a simple setting, the message does not change. Jesus Christ was truly born of the Virgin Mary and his cradle was a manger. He is our Savior and King, and someday we who believe will see him face to face in glory!

Graffunder is a member of Hope Lutheran, Minneapolis, Minn., where she serves as the organist.

BY PASTOR MATTHEW PILLMAN

t's a story of contrasts. Two families on Christmas night: one is the master, the other the slave. Two homes: one is a mighty mansion, the other a humble hut. The setting is 1863 on a cotton plantation in South Georgia. Suddenly, the slave hut breaks into song:

Go tell it on de mountain, Over de hills and everywhere. Go tell it on de mountain, Dat Jesus Christ is born.

First known as the "Christmas Plantation Song," this Christmas classic finds its origins in the oral tradition of African American spirituals. There was even an Easter version that proclaimed the words "Dat Jesus lives again." A man named John Wesley Work, Jr., is credited with capturing this oral gem and putting it on paper. Work taught university-level Latin and Greek, but his side hobby was compiling spirituals into hymnals. He is credited with writing the three verses as we recognize them today.

While shepherds kept their watching O'er silent flocks by night, Behold, throughout the heavens There shone a holy light.

Notice the contrast. Shepherds and flocks are surrounded by heavenly holiness. The dark of night gives way to angelic light.

The shepherds feared and trembled When, lo, above the earth Rang out the angel chorus That hailed our Savior's birth.

The contrasts continue. The fearless guardians of sheep tremble. The quiet of night erupts in heavenly song. An ordinary night turns historic with news of the Messiah!

Down in a lonely manger The humble Christ was born; And God sent us salvation That blessed Christmas morn.

The angels point the way to the Christ child. The God of heaven has assumed utter humility. The God whom heaven and earth cannot contain now lays in an animal feeding trough. And what's more, this humble child was God's chosen means to free the world from the slavish bonds of sin.

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Slaves, once legal property of their master, were legally set free. Imagine the scene on some plantations where cruel masters have mercilessly beaten their slaves for years. Suddenly, a messenger summits a nearby hill.

Gasping for breath, he shouts to everyone in earshot, "You're free! You're free!"

Despite the good news, many are incredulous. "After a lifetime of slavery, how could it be true? What if the messenger is lying? Where's the catch? Surely freedom isn't free!" Others receive the news with great joy. They pack up their few possessions. Quickly and quietly, they leave the plantation. But with nowhere to go, they soon find themselves hungry, helpless, and lost. Soon they return to the merciless master and place themselves back into slavery.

But there are those who, like the Israelites fleeing Egypt, entrust themselves into the hands of a leader. This leader would guide them safely across modern-day Jordan—the Mason-Dixon Line. History records that as the slaves were freed, they would sing their way to their new home, announcing their freedom and welcoming others to join them.

When Jesus came to earth, the angels heralded his birth as the Savior. Like the American slaves, some reject the Messiah and others believe and quickly fall away. But the shepherds received the news with joy and praise. They ran to the tomb, worshiped their Savior, and then shared the good news with everyone in earshot. I guess you could say they were telling it on the mountain, over the hills, and everywhere!

I wonder if God's words spoken by Isaiah went through anyone's mind at the time:

Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young (40:9–11).

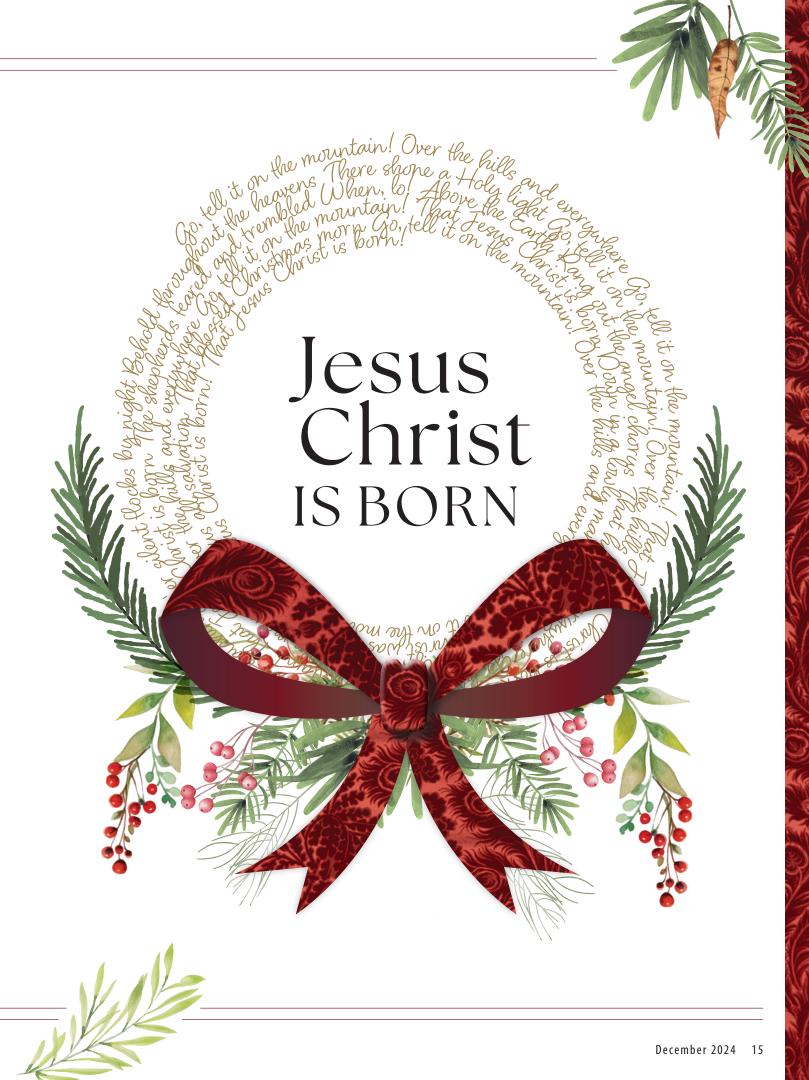
Dear reader, your Shepherd Savior is born. And oh, what blessed contrasts he brings. He comes in humility. He comes in strength. He comes to set you free. He comes to be your Lord and Master. He is the Good Shepherd. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Condemned by sin, you are called his enemy. Justified by faith, you are called his friend. This is the good news that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds, to me, and to you. This is the good news that fills the mountains and hills today—"dat Jesus Christ is born!"

Pillman is the pastor of Emmanuel Lutheran, an AFLC Home Missions church plant.









We need training.

BY PASTOR MICAH HJERMSTAD

s a pastor, I began each confirmation year with a parent and student orientation meeting. There, I read an article that points out that our children are being catechized, whether we know it or not, and it's so important to catechize in the Christian faith.

Catechesis is a word that usually describes religious instruction, but it's not confined to the church walls or to the Christian religion. The world seeks to catechize us into various false teachings, secularism, and the like. Our youths' familiarity with Ouija boards and their openness to things like cohabitation were consistently sobering reminders that the devil, the world, and our own flesh like to catechize at young ages.

But it's not just children. Catechesis is life-long discipline, and false teachers (II Peter 2:1) don't give up once people reach a certain age. Seemingly harmless phrases can have a significant impact on our theology. Phrases seen on social media, like "Heaven just gained another angel," confuse the doctrines of man, creation, and ultimately salvation, the resurrection, and eternal life. Those are core, fundamental beliefs in the Christian faith!

We can even be catechized into teachings from other Christians who take different positions on various Christian matters. Take baptism, for example. We believe that Scripture teaches that baptism brings forgiveness of sins and salvation (Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Romans 6:3–4, and I Peter 3:21). This is further expounded upon in the Augsburg Confession and Small Catechism, which the AFLC joyfully affirms. Yet it's not uncommon to hear AFLC members and congregational leaders make statements like, "Of course no one actually believes that baptism saves."

I can't say that I know exactly where that comes from in every particular instance. I do know that the vast majority of Christian media and literature comes from various non-Lutheran Protestant groups. And while I praise God for my non-Lutheran brothers and sisters, there's a reason the AFLC is Lutheran. Some of the confusion undoubtedly comes from a desire to distance oneself from more prominent Lutheran groups that abuse the Lutheran doctrine of baptism. But our reaction should not be to disregard what we believe Scripture teaches and what Lutherans (and Christians dating back to the early Church) have believed and taught for centuries. Instead, we should be able to affirm both the efficacy of baptism and the need to "evangelize the baptized lost," those who have fallen away. In other words, the fact that people can and do fall away from the faith ought not to cause us to change what we believe about the beautiful gift of baptism as a means by which God delivers his good gifts of grace, forgiveness, and faith.

This is just one example of why training and instruction are so important, so that we are no longer "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14). It's also important for leaders and pastors

Lay training opportunities.

Visit our website to learn more about lay training opportunities in the AFLC.

· aflc.org/ltp

If you are interested in learning more about our seminary, email Dr. James Molstre, dean of the Free Lutheran Seminary.

• james.molstre@flbc.edu.

Hjermstad, a member of Grace Free Lutheran, Maple Grove, Minn., is the president of the AFLC. to be properly trained. In Paul's second letter to Timothy, he charges him to "preach the Word," because a time will come when people will "turn away from the truth and wander into myths" (4:1–5). In other words, be prepared to rightly handle the Scriptures when the world around you seeks after other things.

I praise God that the AFLC embraces lay ministry, and I pray that remains a defining mark of our body. Our need for quality lay pastors will continue to grow as the pastoral shortage remains. I pray that our lay pastors remain students of the Word and embrace opportunities to grow in our knowledge and love for Scripture.

And I praise God for our seminary. Three years of residential training can be challenging, but it's hard to overvalue that investment for the rest of one's years of ministry. There are good reasons to not go to seminary and to pursue the lay ministry path, but we must guard against pursuing lay ministry simply because it's the path of least resistance and the fast-track to getting where we want to be. Sometimes the more challenging path prepares us (catechizes us) for what God has planned for us.

Pray for the teaching that happens in your congregation and that students will be grounded in the truth and grace of God's Word. Pray for your pastor, regardless of his educational background, and encourage him to continue to pursue continuing education. Find opportunities to grow in your understanding of God's Word: Bible study, Bible conferences, or podcasts. May we all be lifelong catechumens of the precious gift of God's Word.



BY KIRK RAUTIO

nother season at the ARC is nearing its end, and what a perfect year to have our theme be "Call On Him," based on Psalm 17:6. We called, and he answered in ways only he can make happen. Through our small, yet mission-minded staff, multiple volunteer groups, continuous prayer warriors, and fiscal donors, God showed us yet again that all we need to do is call, and he is there waiting to fulfill our requests. We could fill the pages of this publication with stories of the blessings from this season! But here are some of the big ones.

- The Covenant House will have all new windows by year end, and most rooms will have air conditioning installed by next spring.
- After a five-year search for the right contractor, we have finally found an option for repairing the leaky gym roof.
- Our fiscal donor base has grown again this year. Some of these donors assisted us by keeping the price of youth retreats low. Because of this, we were able to experience new souls coming to Christ and multiple baptisms in the lake this year! Knowing that there are individuals who love youths and are willing to give toward getting more of them to camp is humbling and encouraging.
- Through God's provision and guidance, we have been able to get the longterm debt number down below the \$300k mark! What a journey that has been.

Through all these blessings, it is becoming very clear that we are being heard by God, and he is leading us in the direction he wants us to be going.

As we look forward to next season, we have chosen to take on the theme "Abide In Him" from John 15:4. We look forward to abiding in his provision and protection in 2025. We are also excited to receive his refinement of the ARC and its facilities, staff, fiscal position, and mission. As we plan camps for 2025, we are excited to see what he brings through the speakers for each person attending. We always look forward to seeing and hearing the impact of the Word of God on his

As we make plans for the facilities, we are excited to see what direction he guides us to go and what projects he wants us to complete. As we plan fiscally, we are excited to see how and where he is going to provide the resources to make our mission a reality. We look forward to seeing how this next year of refinement will position the ARC to make an impact more fully for God's kingdom on earth for decades to come.

We ask you to pray for the ARC as we are working with the state and federal camp statute enforcement agencies this fall. This is going to be our first major refinement process. Please pray as we send out letters and proposals for our vision and plans. Pray that we will present what God wants for the ARC. We pray for you that you will also find yourself abiding in our Savior and receiving his gentle refinement.

2025 event schedule.

- · Side X Side & Sno Daze: January 31-February 2
- Women's Retreat: April 25-27
- · Family Work Weekend May 23-25
- Fire Up Jr High Camp: June 22-26
- Family Camp: July 27-August 2

Rautio is the executive director of the Association Retreat Center, near Osceola, Wis.

Serving your teaching ministry.

Keep growing in your faith.

Daily meditation in God's Word feeds the soul and strengthens faith in Jesus Christ. The new Church Year begins with the first Sunday in Advent, and the new calendar year begins January 1. Both are perfect times to begin reading through the Bible individually or as a family or to begin reading a new daily devotional book. Threads of Grace and Luther for the Busy Man, published by Ambassador Publications, are excellent options for adults. Reading through a good Bible story book is a beneficial option for families. A variety of resources can be found on our website and online bookstore at ambassadorpublications.org.



The author (center) shared a gospel message with children at Immanuel Lutheran, New Leipzig, N.D.

Christopherson, a member of New Luther Valley Lutheran, McVille, N.D., is the director of AFLC Parish Education.

BY MARIAN CHRISTOPHERSON

arish Education is all about the teaching ministry of the congregation. We are here to come alongside *your* congregation and help you shine forth God's light and truth as you seek to faithfully teach God's Word to all ages. Following are three areas of focus in our service to AFLC congregations.

Encourage and support.

Parish Education supports the teaching ministry of your congregation by providing books and resources on our campus and online bookstores and at AFLC events such as conferences, district gatherings, WMF rallies, and more. It has been a joy to visit with many of you recently at these occasions! Fall opportunities brought me to western North Dakota for a district AFLC gathering and to Immanuel Lutheran (New Leipzig, N.D.) and Trinity Lutheran (Mott, N.D.) for congregational visits, followed by a WMF gathering at King of Glory Lutheran in Shakopee, Minn. Throughout the year, we provide guidance and support for your educational ministries by phone, email, and online communication.

Teach and equip.

We are thankful for all the teachers in our congregations instructing children, youth, and adults about Jesus the Savior. Your work is important! You are helping to establish a firm foundation on the eternal Word of God

and nurturing faith from infant baptism through old age (Matthew 19:13–14; 28:19–20; Proverbs 22:6; Isaiah 46:4). To strengthen and enrich your teaching ministry, Parish Education has teacher training resources available and can also present Christian education workshops in your local congregation or district. Our website is being redesigned to better support teachers. Follow our Education Spotlight feature, and keep watching for more teaching tools that are being added regularly. What would be helpful for you? Please share your ideas with us.

Produce and publish.

Under the name of Ambassador Publications, AFLC Parish Education produces and publishes resources to serve your congregation, including Sunday school curriculum, catechetical tools, Bible studies, devotional and historical books, as well as supplementary materials and supplies like attendance charts and certificates for baptism and confirmation. Our most recent publications are the *Jesus A–Z* children's book and coloring book by Leslie Hall; volume 6 in the AFLC Heritage Series, *From Freedom to Life*, by Pastor Robert L. Lee; and a I Peter Bible study on Hope by Pastor Gary Jorgenson. Watch for a new Bible study on II Peter coming later in 2025. We are also working on a visual mission story project, youth resources, and

more adult Bible studies; updating teacher manuals; and planning projects to commemorate the 500th anniversary of *Luther's Small Catechism* (2029) and the Augsburg Confession (2030).



BY WAYNE AND JANE SMITH

s believers in Christ, how well do we know our God-given mission and how well do we carry it out? The early Church in Philippi has some ideas for us. Philippians 2:4 says, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Paul wrote to the Philippians while he was in prison. He was joy-filled, persevered, and relied on God. The Philippians' steadfastness in faith, generosity, and adherence to Paul's teachings made them a model community in the early Christian world. It sounds like they knew their mission and were busy carrying it out.

The analogy of a rowboat, one that takes two oars and two people to make it move, is apt. Congregations and pastors who work together reach their goals. Working alone, they are handicapped and go in circles.

The Pastoral and Congregational Care Team's (PACCT) purpose statement is "While you serve Christ, our team is standing with you." We are busy caring for pastors and congregations in many different ways, and our column in the June issue identified some of them. Since then, PACCT members with specific training in conflict resolution have been tapped to help congregations explore methods of improving how they approach conflict and how to work through issues in a productive, biblical manner. Team members continue to help congregations explore calling a pastor, using the Pastoral Call Process Toolkit as a resource and guide.

Caring for each other is a key part of our mission. Much of what we do involves one-to-one contact with pastors and leaders of congregations. We call people. We text people. We write sympathy notes to those who have lost loved ones, and we follow up with them to see how they are doing. We listen to people when they call us. We visit congregations; we have fellowship with them and pray with and for them. We study Scripture to see what it says about how to minister to those with specific needs. We don't use a onesize-fits-all approach; each of us is uniquely created and benefits from a personal connection to explore needs and potential options. We offer hope. We encourage. Galatians 6:9-10 says, "And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."

Yes, these things sound like what God has called all of us to do faithfully. Often it takes an investment of time and energy beyond what we know we have available! Psalm 73:26 says, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." We trust him to provide what we need to help care for others. Rowing together with God provides blessings beyond compare.

Serving the AFLC

Members

Pastor Marlin & Joyce Harris Tom & Linda Mathre Roger & Lindsay Benson Wayne & Jane Smith Dr. Steven & Angie Lombardo

Specializing in

Prevention care Intervention care Recovery care

Webpage

aflc.org/pacct

Wayne and Jane Smith, members of Christ the King Free Lutheran, Pipestone, Minn., are the PACCT team leaders.



here was a pastor's family living in the American West in pioneer days. Conditions were difficult for them with little money to work with. Christmas was nearing, and the weather was cold and harsh. It was in the most difficult year of 1893. The father had to travel around to hold services in the bitter cold, wearing a coat that was barely warm enough in October. Many times, he survived with only a breakfast of tea without sugar and a piece of bread without butter.

The wife said: I patched our clothes with what I could. It was often around zero degrees. Our two boys were healthy, but our little Ruth was sickly, not strong. Families living nearby were friendly and

nice, but in the hard times had all they could do to take care of themselves. Each had to fight their own battles. Gradually, my faith began to waver, just when I needed to count on it most. In my youth, I had learned to take God at his word and understood the lesson well. I had to live on the promises in dark times until I could, like David, know who my Rock and Redeemer was. Now my daily prayer was that I might know his forgiveness in all things. It looked like God had forgotten us, but I didn't tell my family what was on my mind.

Christmas drew closer and closer. Our sons were waiting to receive skates for Christmas; my Ruth was hoping to get a pretty doll, and she was encouraged to pray about that.

Eventually, Christmas Eve morning came, and my husband was called out to visit a sick parishioner. I wrapped a scarf around his neck and wanted him to take a lantern along as he usually did, but the words died on my lips, and I let him go without it. It was a dark and hopeless day. I let the children go to bed early, and then I sat by Ruth's bed and heard her for the last time pray to God confident and sure about the doll: "I believe she will be here in the morning, Mother!"

a hammer and opened the box. Inside, we saw that it contained many kinds of clothing. I felt like my Savior was casting a reproachful look at me. John sat down and covered his face with his hands.

"I can't talk now, can't explain things; I have failed the faith, and God has tried me to see if I could hold out. Now I can say how terrible it is to fall away from God."

"John," I said, "don't talk like that. Let us both pray and ask God to forgive us."

I fell to my knees. The darkness left my soul. It was as if Jesus spoke to me with this loving word, "Daughter."

Emotional, I wanted to die so that I wouldn't see her impossible dream destroyed. In my loneliness, I let my tears fall freely. Eventually, my dear John came home, tired and frozen. When I looked in his face and saw the dark despair resting there, I thought that my John had also given up. I put some tea in front of him, but I felt sick and confused. He gripped my hand, and we sat awhile without saying a word. I felt that I could tell God that his promises failed to be true.

Then John suddenly sprung up. A bell was ringing outside. A vigorous knocking could be heard, and an older member of the congregation stood in the doorway.

"Something has come for you," he said, "and I pushed myself to bring it. I suspect that it has something to do with Christmas. I also brought a bowl of potatoes and some flour from my wife."

After he brought the box in, he left with a hearty, "Merry Christmas!"

Without saying a word, John took

"Wait a minute, dear," he said, and went into another room.

I fell to my knees. The darkness left my soul. It was as if Jesus spoke to me with this loving word, "Daughter." Glorious words of love and joy streamed in over my soul. I was so filled with love and thanksgiving that I forgot all else. I called to John to come to me so that I could find out if he had also found peace. When he returned, I could see that he

I told him, "I fell on my knees. The darkness fell from my soul. It was as if Jesus restored me with the precious word 'daughter."

"Now, my dear wife, we will thank God together." Then he spoke from his heart words of praise and thanksgiving from the Bible, for nothing else could bring forth our thanksgiving as much as this.

It was 11 p.m. We put more wood on the dying fire, lit a lamp, and began to look at our gifts. There was an overcoat and a dress. Oh, we both cried and laughed like children! There were boots for each of us. In mine lay a paper. I still have it and keep it for my children. It contains Jacob's blessing on Asher: "Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be" (Deuteronomy 33:25).

In a pair of winter gloves for John, the same dear hand had written: "For I, the Lord thy God, will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, 'Fear not, I will help thee" (Isaiah 41:13).

That was a wonderful treasure. There were clothes for the boys and a red dress for Ruth. There was an envelope containing \$10. In the middle of the bundle in the chest there was a gift, and we both broke out in tears when we saw it contained a magnificent doll. Then we broke out again, rejoicing, for next to the doll were two pairs of skates! We cried for joy. It was now past midnight.

I made some tea with some stew, and John boiled some eggs. Oh, how good it all tasted! And so we talked with heartfelt joy of the wonderful help God had directed to us. You should have seen our children on Christmas morning. The boys shouted when they saw the skates, and Ruth whispered, "I knew it had come, Mother, but I will thank God anyway."

A church in the East had sent us the box, and we sent them our heartiest thanks. In our memories, that Christmas stands as a special stone of remembrance (I Samuel 7:12).

The hard times are over, but we have our hope in God and have not feared anything that could cause fear, for we have confidence in his care for us.

Author unknown. From Folkekalender. 1926. Translated by Pastor Raynard Huglen, Newfolden, Minn. "Landscape in Winter," by Ladislav Mednyánszky, c. 1900. Slovak National Gallery.

PEOPLE & PLACES

Pastor Craig Benson was installed Nov. 10 at Salem Lutheran, Radcliffe, Iowa, and St. Paul's Lutheran, Jewell, Iowa, with Pastor Jason Holt, presidential ministry associate, officiating.

Pastor Joshua Skogerboe was installed Nov. 17 at Veritas Church, Prescott Valley, Ariz., with Dr. Wade Mobley, president of FLBCS, officiating.

Pastor Tom Tuura has resigned from Christ Lutheran, Stover, Mo., and is open for a call effective Dec. 31.

Pastor Patrick VandenBos has resigned from St. Ansgar's Lutheran, Salinas, Calif.

Pastor James Lindgren has resigned from Good Shepherd Free Lutheran, Madison, S.D., and Center Free Lutheran, Salem, S.D.

Lay Pastor Gary Maxwell has accepted a call to serve St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran, Gifford, Ill.

Lay Pastor Jon Dryburgh has accepted a call to serve Valley Free Lutheran, Portland, N.D.

Lay Pastor Troy McNear has accepted a call to serve Trinity Free Lutheran, Minnewaukan, N.D.

AFLC Evangelism and Discipleship has launched a podcast called "Living as a Disciple." The podcast can be found on Spotify, the Apple Podcast app, YouTube, and the AED website (aflc.org/evangelism).

Registration is now open for **Youth Worker Weekends**, planned for Jan. 17–19 at the Association Retreat Center, near Osceola, Wis. The AFLC Youth Ministries training event is geared toward paid and volunteer youth workers. The best rate is available through Dec. 5, with options for the full weekend, one overnight, and the Saturday seminar. Registration can be found on the AFLC Youth Ministries website (aflc.org/youth).

OCTOBER MEMORIALS

Bible College
David & Amber
Jensen
Carol Jones
Ruth Claus
Dwain Bell

Bruce Shepperd

Seminary David & Amber

Jensen Perry Grundyson **World Missions**

Michael Flechsig Joanne Dahlin (2) Bonnie Bundy

WMF

Anne Hovey Carol Lovro Marian Borstad ... in honor of

Seminary

Pastor Wade Mobley



Gala marks 60 years of FLBCS

The Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary celebrated 60 years with a gala event on Nov. 14 in the Student Life Center. Following a dinner, the program included testimonies from students from both schools, faculty and staff, and an address from Dr. Philip Dearborn (left), president of the Association of Biblical Higher Education. The FLBC Concert Choir (above) also sang two pieces.

AFLC BENEVOLENCES January 1-October 31, 2024

FUND	REC'D IN OCTOBER	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	% OF SUBSIDY	PRIOR YEAR-TO-DATE
General Fund	\$30,939	\$347,917	76	351,201
Evangelism	6,959	95,438	70	93,056
Youth Ministries	9,886	121,651	78	108,627
Parish Education	11,401	154,608	83	124,196
Seminary	27,441	231,291	81	219,873
Bible College	34,337	554,218	118	323,692
Home Missions	30,572	278,786	66	260,275
World Missions	32,178	336,079	69	327,988
Personal Support	71,904	669,829	86	619,203
TOTALS	\$255,617	\$2,789,818	83	2,428,112

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



BY PASTOR JOE LARSON

fter a concise proclamation of the gospel, Paul uses the rest of I Corinthians 15 to explain to the Corinthians (and us) how exactly it is that the dead are raised. Paul does this because of an ...

Objection (v. 35)

Maybe simple skepticism, maybe outright doubt, but altogether unfitting for members of the body of Christ. The resurrection of Christ is central to the gospel, and our coming resurrection is central to the fulfillment of Christ's promises to us, his bride. What good is an engagement ring if the groom doesn't plan to have a wedding day? What good is a coupon if the store has closed permanently? No, there must also be a hope of resurrection for us since there was a resurrection for Christ.

Illustration (vv. 36-37)

It's hard to miss Paul's connection between the "death" of a seed and the eventual "resurrection" of the grain. If there is confidence that the seeds we sow will sprout into grain, why is there any doubt that Christ will come to raise us up from the earth when he returns? The same God who made seasons, growth, and all the order that we trust in is the One who has promised that the "sowing" of the righteous at death will result in a bountiful harvest of life everlasting one day. But be warned: those who die outside of this hope are seeds of wickedness, planted as weeds that will be cast into the fire when they rise up. That's because there is ...

Variety (vv. 38-41)

Believe it or not, corn is not the only crop you can grow. Bodies belong not just to man but also to the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea. But there is a difference between them. Just as the sun, moon, and all other stars have been set apart for their unique purposes, so also has God designed each flesh uniquely: the light frame of birds fit for flying, the gills of the fish for swimming, and all the power and reason of man for the sake of stewarding God's creation. But because of the fall into sin, both man and creation are broken and in need of a ...

Transformation (vv. 42–44)

Did you wince a little reading the first part of this word? Transition. Transformation. Trans this, trans that. It's hard to escape that loaded term. But I'll give credit to something at the heart of that very confused movement: change is needed to make things right. However, this change is not determined by our feelings or our perception of our bodies. Instead, this transformation is an improvement, a progression, a metamorphosis from what we have known to what we will know forever. Instead of the weakness and brokenness that we are so familiar with. we will be raised into imperishable bodies. How can this be so? It's all thanks to ...

The Better Adam (vv. 45-47)

While Adam was given life by the very breath of God, he soon rebelled against his maker, using that very same breath to blame God and his wife for his

prideful disobedience. He is the father who represents us, and one that we rightly deserve. We share in that broken nature, sinning boldly and then blaming God or others or even justifying ourselves by redefining sin. But thanks be to God that he came and dwelt among us. Thanks be to God that the new Adam took on this weak flesh and endured suffering for our sake: physical suffering, weakness, emotional betrayal, and being entirely forsaken by the Father on the cross. Praise God that his body didn't return to the dust, but that he rose on the third day and so revealed not only that he had beaten sin, death, and the devil, but that in him we too can have ...

Victory (vv. 48-49)

Your hope and life are not tied to myths. Your future is not to be an ethereal blob floating on a cloud. We will have bodies—bodies that can still enjoy food as the risen Jesus did (Luke 24). Remarkably, I think food is the smallest of joys that we will share with all things made new. Because if you are Christ's, then you look ahead to being like him. Not like God in order to usurp him, as Adam was tempted, but as a child of God, given an inheritance of eternal life because of your Savior-brother. He who shared in our weak flesh and emerged victorious will divide the spoils he won and raise us all into his image. Praise God for this restoration hope delivered through faith in the victorious Son!

Larson serves Christ the King Free Lutheran, Pipestone, Minn., as the associate pastor.

THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd. Minneapolis, Minnesota 55441

Periodicals

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

SOMETHING TO SHARE

Seasons of spiritual life.

BY KIRSTIE SKOGERBOE

once had a conversation with a college student about the benefits of memorizing Scripture and her plans to memorize some new passages during the next school year. "I should be memorizing more *now*," the student lamented. I happened to know, however, that she was overloaded with Latin homework, preparation for a competitive academic showcase, and a frenetic debate schedule that claimed a large percentage of her sleep hours. "It's okay," I told her. "Some seasons are for memorizing, and some are for reciting."

I've found this idea helpful as a framework for all of spiritual life. I thank God for the months or years when I have been able to devote significant time to personal Bible reading and prayer, or to studying large and varied portions of Scripture. But there have also been entire years where all I could manage to read was the Psalms. Some months, my husband and I have eked out family devotions in our joint full-time work/part-time work/graduate school/new parent schedule, and I haven't had time to also sit down and keep working through Ezekiel on my own. Some weeks, the Sunday pericope is my main anchor to God's voice, and the corporate prayer gives me words I wouldn't otherwise have to say to him in return. Some nights, my personal devotions involve reciting some verses in the shower and praying over and over, "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

It's been a repeated temptation for me to consider these seasons as representative of spiritual weakness. I sometimes feel guilty when my husband and I pray through a compline (end of day) service, but I pray my own words haphazardly. The Scripture I hear in church seems like it should be

meaningful but superfluous to my own reading mid-week, the congregational prayer a formality to remind me that I should be praying solo, and the passages I've memorized a commendable surplus to other daily meditation. I expect that my ability to delight in Christ will be proportional to my energy level, best fostered on my own, and dependent on my daily labor to hide God's Word in my heart.

Some of the most significant moments of my spiritual life have happened during that labor, when I've been rested and alone. But I have mischaracterized God's work when I've assumed that he is most active when my schedule is most open and my devotional habits most predictable. The spiritual health and delight that God plants in our hearts during times of rigorous Scripture study, memorization, and prayer bear fruit that he intends us to eat in the winters of our spirituality. God has also given us the church to sustain us through his Word, his body and blood, and the prayers of his people. Any prayer or Scripture passage—however short, however often repeated—binds our wandering hearts to Jesus.

We can delight in Christ both while laboring to hide the seed of his Word and by rejoicing when we discover its stores. "For everything there is a season," writes King Solomon. "A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 2b). As the bride of Christ, we can say in every season, "With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste" (Song of Solomon 2:3b).

Skogerboe, the digital communications coordinator for the AFLC, lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.