

lightofChrist

s a Christian I love to celebrate the baby Jesus' birth in many ways. I bake and clean, make and buy gifts. I dig out all my Christmas CDs and play them over and over. There is garland to hang and lights to string inside and out. And, of course, I go out and try to find the perfect, real Christmas tree. When I do, I have to struggle to get it in a cart and out to my car where, again, I struggle to get it out of the cart and then fight to get it in the trunk without breaking too many branches or damaging my car!

One very special tradition for me is the Sunday school Christmas program. During my childhood I participated in the annual tradition. Over the years I have been involved with and watched my own children participate in dozens of Christmas programs. One program I was in more than 30 years ago still stands out above most of the others. Instead of a traditional Christmas hymn, our theme song was, "The Light of the World is Jesus," written by Phillip P. Bliss in 1875. I remember thinking that it was a strange song for a Christmas program, but I still associate that hymn with Christmas. The first verse says, "The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin; The light of the world is Jesus; Like sunshine

at noonday His glory shone in, The light of the world is Jesus."

That baby, the infant Jesus, who was born on a cold, dark night in a borrowed manger brought light to me. God saw fit to send

His blessed, holy and only Son to this sin-sick, dark and dying world. Why? Because I needed His light. Psalm 119:176 says, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep." Scripture tells us that the lost walk in darkness. That means people are without the light of Jesus. In John 8:12 and 9:5, Jesus tells us that He is the Light of the World! Does your heart rejoice at that truth? Mine does!

As I look around me, however, I see many still in the darkness. There are souls waiting for us to bring them light. Another song from my childhood says, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine!" Matthew 5:14-16 tells us that if Jesus is in us, then we are a light to the world, a beacon on a hill, (like a lighthouse) that cannot be hidden. Verse 16 tells us to let our lights shine before men.

I need to continually ask myself if Jesus' light shines through my attitudes, priorities, deeds and lifestyle. Am I allowing the Holy Spirit to fill me with the love and light of Christ? It is my prayer that we all would be shining for Jesus. Maybe this Christmas you'll sing my favorite

Christmas hymn. Thank Him for His indescribable gift and consider what God would have you do to spread the light of the gospel.

Myhre is a member of Bethany Free Lutheran, Wahpeton, N.D.

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God did not send a subordinate to redeem us. He chose to do it himself.

— Alister McGrath

Don't let this Christmas season overwhelm you. Don't feel you have to do everything, or go into debt just to impress other people. Focus instead on Jesus.

— Billy Graham "Hope for Each Day"

What greater honor could God give to us unworthy sinners than the incarnation of his Son becoming like us, taking upon himself our nature. Some day we shall be given grace to perceive and ponder this rightly.

— Carl O. Rosenius "Rosenius" Daily Meditations"

God, who knows no before or after, entered time and space. God, who knows no boundaries took on the shocking confines of a baby's skin, the ominous restraints of mortality.

— Philip Yancey "The Jesus I Never Knew"





what happens
when the good gifts
from God
aren't always
what we want

fix your eyes on the author of

o this gift has been given to you. There it is, wrapped up in paper with writing in black Sharpie all over it: "Warning: the contents of this package will change your life." You open it (you can't help it, for living is receiving — it is opening the gift). Then it's yours: death, loss, financial hardship, natural disaster, abuse, an accident, a handicap, relational conflict, or a cancer diagnosis.

You didn't ask for this. You don't want it. But there's no gift receipt. No returns or exchanges. The gift writes itself into the fabric of your story, and you can't shake it. You can't give it back.

What do you do? What can you do?

In the Bible, Christ's apostles used words like "rejoice" and "give thanks" in their counsel to believers facing hardship. Although we see Paul seeking the Lord for deliverance from his "thorn," David crying out to God in confusion and conflict, and Job complaining to God out of the bitterness of his heart (Job 10:1), according to Scripture, the primary response the Christian is to have in the face of adversity is one of joy and gratitude.

Why? Is it because adversity is fun? It's not. Is it because hardship is good? A cancer diagnosis doesn't feel good. Neither does subsequent chemotherapy. "Consider it all joy," James says.

"Give thanks in all circumstances," says Paul (I Thessalonians 5:18). Ah, there we go. I'm off the hook. Give thanks in all circumstances, not for — I can maybe do that. Still there's this command to "take joy" and the hunch I have that both joy and gratitude are meant to be genuine heart responses, not just dutiful prayers prayed in submission to a demand.

So how do I make that joy and that gratitude mine when life hurts? When so much is so hard? I know from reading Peter, Paul, and James that testing builds endurance, and trials make faith. But really, sometimes, that doesn't matter. It doesn't seem worth it. I'm only honest

when I admit that very often faith isn't as important to me as it is to God.

But it is important to God. And faith isn't just good for God; it's good for me — not the intellectual head-nod to truth kind of faith, but the kind of faith that demonstrates trust: a relational faith. Faith that says to God, "Abba, I trust you. I trust you to father me out of immaturity, I trust you to hold me when I cry and complain in the bitterness of my heart, to carry me when I cannot follow where you lead. I trust you to redeem this — even this — for my good and your glory."

It is this kind of faith, this kind of trust, which creates and nurtures joy and gratitude quite naturally. Or better said, supernaturally. It is God who makes this kind of faith. It is seeing His glory and His goodness that plants the seed and brings life to such a life-giving faith. And how badly we need it. How badly I need it.

How do we do it? How do I foster such faith? Trusting God to actually do the making of me and my faith, how can I position myself to receive this gift from Him?

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2, NIV).

"Fix our eyes ..." This is more than a glance or a quick glimpse, this is gazing. God-gazing. Through the Scriptures, I gaze at God in the life and person of Christ — Him who said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." When I see Christ, I see God, and I see the God-Man. As I gaze, several things begin to nurture that trust in me.

Jesus "endured ... scorning." Jesus did not like the suffering. He did not like the cross. He despised the suffering and the shame of it. He did not, however, despise God for bringing Him there. Nevertheless, in Christ, I am given permission to hate the pain. Because of Christ, I know it's okay to hate the pain.

And He was quite honest with God about how He felt

Jesus faith

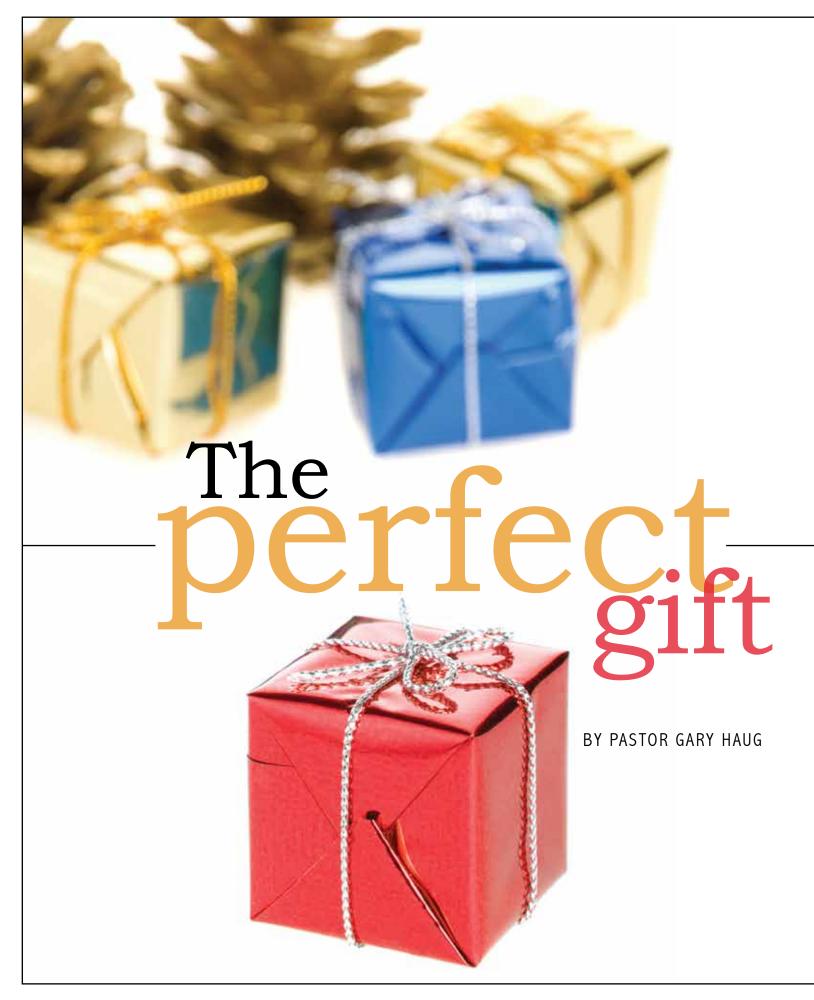
about it. In the garden of Gethsemane the night before His death, knowing what lay before Him, what did He say but, "Abba, I don't want to do this ..."

I'm reminded how harshly Job spoke to God out of his suffering, and how God answered him with a non-answer and yet commended Job for "speaking rightly" of Him. Honesty with God honors God. Speaking real words about real pain to God acknowledges that we believe Him to be as real as the suffering we despise. Honesty with God exhibits trust. It is borne out of trust — a conviction that Abba cares enough to listen and is big enough to take whatever our wounded hearts have to offer.

When I see Christ in His agony speaking to His Father this way, and I know that, in Him, His Father is my Father (even that in Him I see my Father), I am convinced God knows what it's like to hurt and hate it. Somehow, I know He cries with me. And I trust Him.

And this is just the beginning. It is the sunrise of seeing and knowing and understanding the heart of God. There's so much more! And that is good. Because in the midst of suffering of any sort, whether it be a consequence of our actions, the ill-intent of another, or the mysterious providence of God, the soul and spirit of sustaining faith (and the joy and gratitude that follow) is believing deeply that God is God and His heart toward us is good. And in Christ, we see that it is good indeed!

Erickson was diagnosed with cancer in May 2005 and has been receiving chemotherapy since. He has written much of this journey, and has posted his writings on his website at www.jeremyerickson.com. He is in remission and healing, and recently resigned from his youth director position at Emmaus Lutheran in Bloomington, Minn., where he lives with his wife, Jenny, and their two boys. Jeremy is now available on a limited basis to come share his story of faith with your church, youth group, or campus ministry.



ou've hardly seen a more rag-tag, unkempt, tattered-looking bunch of Christmas presents in all your life. But there they were. It was 12:30 a.m. on December 24. As those 26 Russian orphans slowly filed off the plane and into the airport, they had no idea that they were God's wonderful gifts to so many eager, prospective parents.

Most of these adults had been anticipating this arrival for months with the kind of excitement that only the true Spirit of Christmas can instill in a person. These young-

sters, ranging in age from 7 to 13, only knew that they had endured an exhausting trip to America.

It began with a 10-hour bus ride from Bryansk in western Russia to Sheremetevo International Airport in Moscow. Their adventure continued with nearly 22 hours of airline and airport travel time and then culminated in 36 hours of being snowed-in at the terminal in Cincinnati, Ohio.

They were dirty, tired and hungry, and not one of them could speak or understand a word of English. Now they were in this strange place called Minneapolis.

A large crowd of unfamiliar people, many carrying bright balloons with strange writing, were literally jumping up and down in excitement as they surrounded their young guests. Were these the "rich Americans" who were going to give them all the Christmas presents they had heard so much about? Why were some of them crying? My wife and I wondered which of this wide-eyed group of children were the three siblings whom we had agreed to host for the Christmas holidays. Pressed against the back window of the terminal, dressed in their ill-fitting, well-worn winter jackets, none of them looked quite like the pictures from which we had chosen them.

This meeting had really begun years earlier. Although Lucinda and I had already been blessed with two wonderful, godly, natural-born children in Julie and Brandon, we had a deep desire for more. Through the years, God had made it clear that the door to more children by natural means was closed. Lucinda had talked to me often about adoption, but I was dragging my feet. Then, in August 2004, just months before this most unforgettable Christmas, God began to move in our lives and hearts in ways that would lead to making these three Russian Christmas gifts a permanent part of our family.

Throughout the process, God had not only used the circumstances of our lives and the longing of our hearts, but also the leading of His Word. James 1:21 reads, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." In the Old Testament, Exodus 22:22-23 stood out to us, "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry."

Now, nearly two years after that first airport meeting,

we are even more certain that God is using us to demonstrate His love and concern for these children. We traveled to Russia two times during the adoption process. We heard about and witnessed firsthand the distress they had been suffering and the advantages that had been taken. But it was only after the time necessary in America for our children to learn English that we have learned from Elijah, Kristina, and Kostya how God truly heard their cries.

They tell of walking the residential streets of Moscow alone, cold and hungry. They tell of a kindly woman who beckoned them into her house, fed them and gave them each a pair of mittens. They recall this

Russian, "Grandma Zena,"

who told them

about Jesus and prayed for a loving family for them while she was caring for their physical needs. one Sabbath, in

Lucinda and I believe wholeheartedly that began to stir those prayers.

According to Luke chapter four, a synagogue in Nazareth, "The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him (Jesus). Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Now, as we think back to that Christmas Eve of 2004, we are so thankful for the gift of children. We're especially thankful for the gift of Jesus and His proclamation of freedom and favor for each one of us. Our Russian Christmas gifts came with challenges as well as joys. God continues to prove Himself faithful — and surprising. You see, when we finally brought our adopted family home to stay in July 2005, we brought four children home. God gifted us again, this time with our daughter, Katya, but that's a story for another holiday.

Blessed Christmas to all.

God

in our hearts through

Haug is pastor of Solid Rock Free Lutheran, Anoka, Minn.



BY PASTOR MARK JOHNSON

ave you ever wondered what Christmas would be like without all the shopping, wrapping and giving? Giving gifts has been and continues to be a way to remind us of the greatest gift: God sending His only Son to seek and to save sinners. Receiving gifts has also been a part of Christmas over the years. In the midst of all the gift giving, how do we keep Jesus at the very center of our celebration of Christmas? Are there things we can do as a family to help us with this?

As believers our relationship with Jesus Christ is the most precious gift of all. "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift." In II Corinthians 9:6-15 Paul speaks to the church at Corinth and to us as individuals about giving. "Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (vs.7). That last phrase is more literally translated, "God loves a hilarious giver."

In Luke 6:38 Jesus tells us, "Give and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure — pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by

your standard of measure it will be measured to you." The picture is of grain being shaken and packed so that more can be added; more and more until it spills over. That is how God desires to bless us when we give of ourselves to Him and as we give of our time, talents and finances. We give in this way not to get something in return, but out of gratitude to God. Giving and thankfulness are to go handin-hand. It is God's heart to give, "expecting nothing in return" (Luke 6:35).

This Christmas as you receive gifts, let each one remind you of Jesus, of Him coming to us as a baby, shedding His blood for our sins, and giving eternal life to "as may as receive Him" (John 1:12). When you unwrap a present and thank the one who gave it to you, also thank God for His "indescribable gift." When God fills us with gratitude for what Jesus has done, we will overflow with gratitude for the things we receive, as well.

Is God calling you to reconsider how you celebrate Christmas? Does the good news of Christ's birth permeate every aspect of your time together with family and friends? Parents, how about making sure that before you open the



first present, the first thing you do is read the story of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:1-11). Let your kids read it. Let it sink into their hearts and souls. Let them ask questions. How about substituting one of your shopping trips with a trip to a nursing home to visit a shut-in? How about inviting someone from your community who doesn't have any family to come over for Christmas dinner?

Advent is a great time to talk about the second coming of Christ. How about reading Scripture and lighting advent candles as a family. Music is also another way to proclaim the birth of Christ. Invest in some new Christhonoring Christmas music. Set up a nativity scene and explain each part of the Christmas story. As you shop, think about what you are buying and what implication it might have on your children. Is it something that could distract them from Jesus and His Word? There are many things to consider as parents and gift-givers.

As a child I loved to get gifts for Christmas. There would be the anticipation of the gifts appearing under the Christmas tree over time, and then we would finally get to open them up. What a time of joy and celebration. Do

you have a similar kind of joy and amazement when you think about God's gift of salvation in Christ? Young people, do you get as excited about Jesus as you do about your Christmas gifts? When you open your gifts, no matter what it might be, are you grateful? Maybe you wanted an Xbox and got a new pair of dress socks instead. Are you thankful for those dress socks? A heart of thankfulness warms the hearts of God and of your parents. Maybe this Christmas God is calling on you as children to be thankful for everything you get. Remember how much God has blessed you already.

This Christmas let it be about Jesus Christ, the One who put on flesh and "dwelt among us," in order to give us life. Let this Christmas be full of worship to God for the "indescribable" gift of His Son.

Johnson is assistant pastor of Dalton Free Lutheran Parish, Dalton, Minn



Present for AUTHOR UNKNOWN

was asked one day to hold a meeting in the state prison in Michigan City. I sat on the platform beside the warden and watched the 700 inmates come marching into the meeting hall. Some were older, others younger. Among them were 76 under life sentences.

After a song I stepped forward to speak, but the sight of that host of unfortunate men gripped me strongly, and the tears ran down my face. I wanted so much to help them, if only I could. Against the rules of the prison I went down into the hall, shook hands with a number of them and prayed for them. Among others, I stopped at a man who was sentenced to life in prison. He was more than ordinarily marked by sin, with an ugly countenance and showed the marks of a cruel, hard and brutal man. I laid a hand on his shoulder, wept and prayed for him. ...

Some years passed by. I met the warden one day and he said, "Do you remember that prisoner who was under a life sentence, whom you laid your hand on and prayed for? Would you like to hear something about him?"

"Yes I would like to do that," I said.

"Briefly, here it is," said the warden:

Eight years ago Tom Galson was sent here, sentenced to life for murder. He was without doubt one of the most difficult prisoners, brutal and evil, and we were in for much trouble.

Christmas Eve six years ago, I had to change the plans I had made to be at home and instead spend the night at

the prison. Early Christmas morning, while it was very dark, I left the prison to walk home. In my pocket I had several packages for my little daughter. The cold was biting and I pulled my coat tightly around me. As I hurried away, I thought I saw the shadow of someone just outside the prison wall. I stopped to look more closely. Then I discovered a little girl, clad in a thin dress, with no stockings on and with worn-out shoes. In her hand she held a small package.

I wondered who she was and why she was out so early, but I was too tired to investigate further and walked on. Then I noticed that she followed me. I turned around and asked sharply, "What do you want?"

"Are you the prison warden?" she asked.

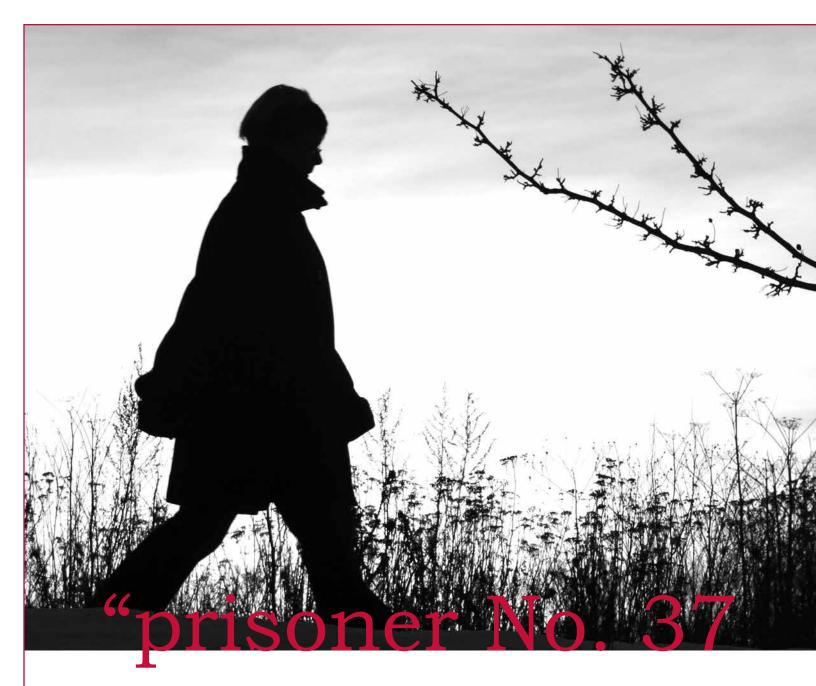
"Yes. But who are you and why aren't you home?"

"Excuse me, mister," she replied, "I don't have a home. My mother died at the poor farm two weeks ago. She told me just before she died that my father, Tom Galson, was in prison and she thought that he would like to see his little girl now that Mother was dead. Would you be so kind to let me visit him? Today is Christmas and I have a little present for him."

"No," I snapped. "You have to wait until visiting day comes."

And I began to go, but I had only taken a couple of steps when I realized she was tugging at my coat. I stopped

(Continued on page 14)



again and looked into her grief-stricken and sorrowful face. Big tears ran down over her cheeks.

In a shaking voice she said, "Mister, if your little daughter was me and her mother had died at the poor farm and her father was in jail and she didn't have any home and no one to love her, don't you think she would want to visit her father? And if it was Christmas and I was the prison warden and she came and asked me for permission to visit her father and give him a little Christmas present, don't you think, don't you think that I would say yes?"

By that time my eyes were full of tears and a big lump filled my throat. I answered, "Yes, my child, I believe you would. And you're going to get permission to visit your father."

I took her hand and went quickly back to the prison. In my office she got to warm herself at the stove, and I sent a guard to get prisoner No. 37. As soon as he entered the office and saw his little daughter, he got very angry and with a coarse, overbearing voice he roared out, "Nellie, what are you doing here? What do you want? Hurry home to your mother!"

Crying, she said, "Dear Papa, Mother died at the poor farm two weeks ago. Before she died she asked me to take good care of little Jimmy, because you were so proud of him, and she asked me to tell you that she loved you. But Papa," she broke out in a loud cry, "Jimmy's also dead; he died last week, and now I'm alone Papa. And today is Christmas and — and I thought since you were so proud of Jimmy, that you would like to get a little Christmas present from him."

She opened the little package she had along and took out a small collection of light, curly hair and put it in her father's hand. "I clipped it from dear little Jimmy's head just before they buried him."

Prisoner No. 37 wept like a little child, and I did the same. No. 37 bent down, and shaking all over, took the



little girl in his arms and hugged her tightly to his bosom.

The scene was too holy for me to look at, and I stole out so that father and child could be alone. An hour later I went in again. No. 37 sat close to the stove with his daughter in his lap and he was transformed, with a mild look on his face.

"Warden," he said, "I don't have any money —" Then suddenly he took his jacket off and said, "For God's sake, don't let my daughter go out in this cold with only this thin dress. Let me give her this jacket. I will work early and late; I will do what is necessary. I will be a man, a father. Warden, will you be so kind as to let her wear this jacket?"

"No Galson," I said, "Keep your jacket; it would not likely work for her. But I shall see that she doesn't freeze. I will take her home with me and I am sure my wife will find some clothes for her."

Weeping, Galson said, "God bless you."

The warden, [finishing his story, said he] took Nellie to

his home and she remained there for quite a few years. She became a true Christian through faith in Jesus Christ.

Tom Galson also became a Christian and was a source of joy and help to others.

Later on I visited the prison again, where the warden asked me, "Would you like to meet Tom Galson, the former prisoner, and see how he is doing now?"

"Yes, I would like to do that," I replied.

The warden took me along to a quiet, peaceful street. Outside a neat house he stopped and rang the doorbell. The door was opened by a smiling young lady who gave a hearty welcome. It was Nellie. Inside, we greeted Galson. He had been pardoned and lived an upright, Christian life together with his daughter. The little Christmas present in prison had done a work of wonder.

From "Evangelisten," and translated from Norwegian by Pastor Raynard Huglen, Newfolden, Minn.

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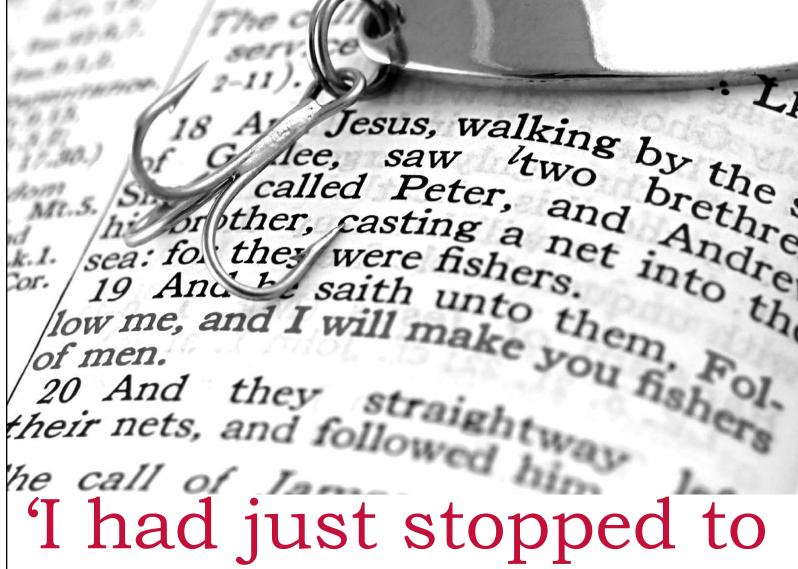
BY PERRY SWENSON

t was one of those glorious, spring evenings that come too rarely in our lives: not a cloud in the sky, or a breath of wind in the air. The flat, mirrored surface of the lake was interrupted only by the occasional splash of a fish, and the curious loon sang its familiar song.

"It just doesn't get much better than this," I thought as I watched my bobbers drift lazily along in front of me.

It was Maundy Thursday, April 13. I had taken a couple of days off from my full-time ministry at Union Gospel Mission to enjoy one of my favorite pastimes — fishing. It hadn't exactly been an easy decision to take time off from work. I had struggled with it some, but eventually God had given me the peace to go ahead with my plans. I was now sitting on a state boat dock at Enemy Swim Lake in northeastern South Dakota. As I sat there taking in the late afternoon sunset, I felt very blessed.





My feelings of peace and serenity were soon interrupted by a lady down the shoreline who was shouting at her black lab.

"Come in, Bill. Come this way," she yelled. The lab kept splashing and swimming in circles as he gleefully disobeyed his master's wish.

I know how stubborn dogs can be sometimes. I have witnessed them swim for so long that they became waterlogged and are barely able to keep their noses above water.

The woman's pleas to the dog became more insistent, and more annoying to me. This scenario went on for 20 minutes or so. At one point I yelled down to her, "If he won't come in, wade out and get him!"

No response. Before long, the silence returned, and I regained my peace and solitude. "This may be a nice evening after all," I thought as I leaned lazily back in my folding chair.

Another glance down the shoreline confirmed that the lady was gone and the dog was no longer splashing around in the water. Old Bill had finally come in for the night, content that he'd had a good swim.

But then I heard the voice of a different woman. Glancing off to my left, I saw a lady running down the shoreline toward me.

"Sir, sir, is that your boat?" I assured her that it was. "There's a man down the lake in some kind of trouble," she continued. "If you would, I think you should go down and check on him."

A man in the water? The ice had gone out just two days before. How could a man possibly be in that freezing water? Abandoning my gear on the dock, I quickly took the tarp off my boat and launched it in record speed. I raced down the shoreline at full throttle until I spotted a man in a black scuba diving suit face down in the water. He wasn't moving.

As I pulled alongside, I reached down and grabbed him by the neck of his slippery rubber diving suit. I hoisted his head as high into the air as I could and proceeded to drag him toward shore. After only 50 feet or so, he slipped from my grasp. I had to circle around and get him again. This time, as I pulled him into the air, he managed to turn his head and glance up at me as if to say, "Who's got me?"

Bill was not a small man, and the added weight of his suit, air tanks and other gear made it almost impossible to hold on to him against the drag of the water. This time I managed to hold on until he was about 25 feet from shore

before Bill slipped again from my grasp. Running my boat aground, I quickly jumped into the freezing water and waded back out to him. Turning him over on his back, I dragged him toward shore with what little energy I had left. Seeing how spent I was, his wife raced into the water and helped drag him to the water's edge.

He coughed, spit up some water, and lay there as exhausted as anyone I've ever seen. That's when I noticed what part of the problem was. Bill had been towing a buoy to alert any boats cruising nearby that a diver was in the water. Somehow, the cord had gotten wound around him several times, restricting his movements. Even after his wife got scissors from their lake home, it took us several minutes to cut him loose and untangle him.

After a few minutes, Bill told us that he thought he could crawl the rest of the way out of the water if we would roll him over on his stomach. We obliged; then ever so slowly, Bill crawled out of the water to a rock wall about 10 feet from the shoreline. Once he was sitting up on his own and I was convinced that he hadn't had a stroke or a heart attack, I decided I needed to get back to my van that was still backed in at the boat launch. As I wished him well and said good-bye to him and his wife, Bill had enough energy to ask my name and where I was from.

Before I knew it, I was sitting back on the dock with my fishing pole as if nothing had happened. Well, not quite. To be truthful, I was very emotional — to the point of shedding tears. I called my wife, Nancy, and told her what had just happened. I broke down and began to weep. I knew

my perspective. I wanted Bill to know that it wasn't luck that I was there fishing on the dock that evening, and I cautioned him not to be telling people that he was lucky. I told him how God had blessed him with a second chance at life, and that it was his job to figure out what the purpose was. I also encouraged him to accept Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior, if he hadn't already done so. Satisfied that I'd accomplished what needed to be done, I wished him a wonderful and blessed life and mailed the letter to Bill in Milbank.

Four or five days later I found a letter in my mailbox from Bill. It was a wonderful letter, thanking me for helping him out of the lake that night. He explained that he'd had some problems with his equipment while he was underwater. One of the weights that was intended to keep him submerged had come off and caused him to surface. The weight on the other side of his body had not come off, and this had caused him to float sideways rather than on his stomach or back. For that reason, he could swim only in circles. His constant thrashing wound him up in his buoy line, making his situation even worse.

When I approached him in my boat and saw him doing the dead man's float, he was actually resting. He had just checked his diver's watch and discovered he had only three to five minutes of air remaining. What he told me next was precisely what I had been hoping to hear. "I had just stopped to ask Jesus, my Lord and Savior, to help me," he said. "That's when you showed up and helped me to shore."

As I read those words, I started to weep at my kitchen

ask Jesus to help me'

I had been used by God to help rescue this man. My dear wife, as I would expect, began to pray for me over the cell phone.

"Thank you, God, for giving Perry the strength he needed to do what had to be done. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you that he's okay and that the man he helped rescue is okay... in Jesus' name, amen."

Then she asked if I had witnessed to Bill. When I told her that I hadn't, she said, "Well, wouldn't it be a shame if you spent that much energy to save his physical body, and he isn't saved? He'd end up going to hell!"

Well, I knew I didn't want to be responsible for anyone going to hell, so I knew that I'd have to make contact with Bill again and find out if he knew Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior.

After I was back home in Sioux Falls, I contacted the resort at Enemy Swim Lake and ended up talking with the woman who had asked me to help Bill. She remembered me and felt comfortable giving me his name. She told me that he is a lawyer in Milbank, S.D. I looked up his address on the Internet and promptly sent him a three-page, typed letter. I knew he hadn't known much more than that I had towed him to shore, so I gave him the whole story, from

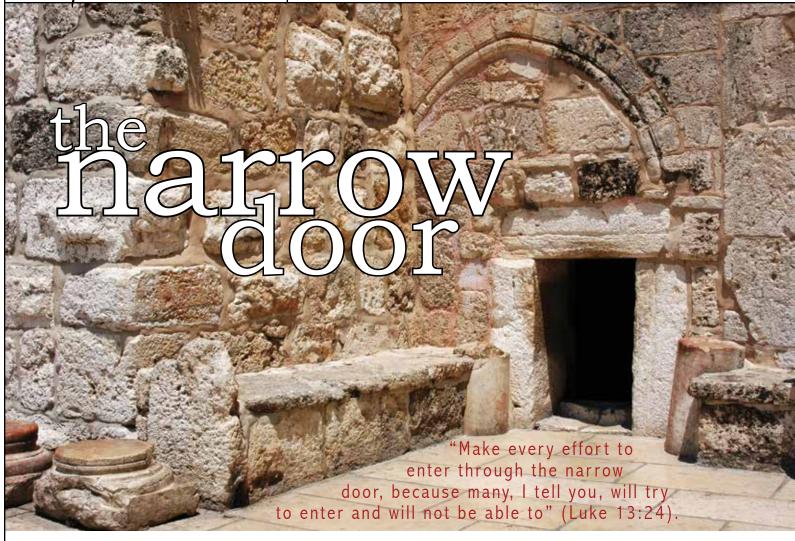
table. I realized that from the beginning I'd been used by God to help save Bill. Hearing from Bill how he had prayed for Jesus to help him confirmed it to me. I wasn't a hero; I had done only what anyone else would have done. The really big story was that God had used me to help Bill. And it felt awesome! That's why I was moved to tears that night on the shore of Enemy Swim Lake. It's the same reason I wept at my kitchen table — I had received God's confirmation that He used me. And now I had the peace of knowing that Bill was a believer. It was the perfect end to the story. If Nancy hadn't encouraged me the way she had, I would never have known the rest of the story.

My passion for fishing has started to decline a little the last few years. My wife explains it this way: "God has made you a fisher of men now." I really landed a lunker that unforgettable evening at Enemy Swim Lake!

Thank you Jesus!

Swenson is a member of Abiding Savior Free Lutheran, Sioux Falls, S.D.

our president writes



strange verse of Scripture for a Christmas meditation, you say? Maybe not.
My wife, Gloria, and I traveled to
Bethlehem in 1991 as part of a Holy Land tour group with Pastor David and Mary Barnhart.
One of highlights was a visit to the Church of the Nativity, the sanctuary that traditionally marks the birthplace of Jesus Christ. Two of its unique characteristics come to mind.

Pastor Robert Lee

The first is the main door to this ancient house of worship, which is a gateway so low that one must literally stoop to enter. A guide informed us that the reason for this unusual portal may have been to prevent soldiers from riding in on their mounts. The church, oldest in the Holy Land still in use, was constructed according to the

belief of local villagers that our Savior was born in a cave, thus explaining the second characteristic, which is the two very narrow flights of stairs leading down to a grotto beneath the altar area. Once again, one must stoop to enter.

Today one must spiritually stoop to enter the heart of

Christmas, our celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, for the doorway of repentance and faith is a narrow one. Some will not be able to enter. The words of Carl Olaf Rosenius in one of his devotionals come to mind: "The kingdom of Christ shall be a kingdom of faith, a humiliating, narrow and low gate for the stiff children of Adam." Entrance is impossible for those who stand straight and tall in their own self-righteousness. The doorway to the heart of Christmas is the right size for little ones, since only those who become like children may enter the kingdom (Mark 10:15).

The old Christmas hymn for children should be our prayer:

"Thy little ones, dear Lord, are we, And come Thy lowly bed to see; Enlighten ev'ry soul and mind, That we the way to Thee may find." — H.A. Brorson

May all of our AFLC family make every effort this holiday season to walk the way of worship to enter the narrow door of repentance and faith, which leads to the heart of Christmas, who is Jesus Christ our Lord. Come, let us adore Him!

Tioga WMF honors faithful mentors

embers of Zion Lutheran's Women's Missionary Federation, Tioga, N.D., honored their senior members with a luncheon on Oct. 25. With the theme, "Thank You for Your Faithfulness," the event was held at the Tioga Independent Living Center. Personalized invitations were sent to 35 ladies 80 years old and older.

The women were treated to spiced apple cider and seated at tables of honor decorated with fall centerpieces while a program of devotions, music, poems and a skit were presented.

"We paused at parts of interest, such as polishing chimneys on the kerosene lamps or traveling to Ladies Aid by horse and sleigh in deep snow, and let the hon-



More than 30 women from Zion Lutheran, Tioga, N.D., were honored for their faithful service during a WMF luncheon.

ored guests entertain us by sharing their memories," wrote Beatta Gilbertson, a WMF member. "We have it so easy; they had to feed wood to the cook stove and haul ashes when they cooked church dinners."

The guests were presented with a glass votive cup and candle with the inscription, "God bless you."

Sliper installed at Pipestone congregation

Pastor Richard Sliper was installed as pastor of Christ the King Lutheran, Pipestone. Minn., on Sept. 24 by Pastor David



Skordahl. Sliper, pictured above with his wife, Rea, was accepted onto the AFLC Fellowship Roster by members of the Coordinating Committee in May 2005.

Originally from Fargo, N.D., Sliper comes from the ELCA. He accepted the call to serve Christ the King in June.

Pastor Mark Olson, Tioga, N.D., has accepted a call to serve Minnesota Valley Free Lutheran, Lakeville, Minn. He has resigned his position as pastor of Zion Lutheran and Norman Lutheran, Tioga.

Andrew Peterson, a 2006 graduate of AFLBS, has accepted a call to serve as youth director of First Lutheran, Oklahoma City, his home congregation.

Pastor Scott McLaughlin was installed Sept. 24 at Vision of Glory Lutheran, Plymouth, Minn., by Pastor Robert Lee, AFLC president.

Pastor Frank Cherney was installed Oct. 8 at Trinity Lutheran, Janesville, Wis., by Pastor Brian Davidson, AFLC secretary.

Pastor David Johnson was installed Oct. 29 at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran, Cloquet, Minn., by Pastor Robert Lee.

Pastor Ken Hart was installed Nov. 5 at Peace Lutheran, St. Francis. Kansas, by Pastor Robert Lee.

Pastor David Fruehauf, New Hope, Minn., married Charlotte Oswood, secretary to the AFLC president, on Oct. 21 at the AFLC schools' campus.

Pastor Nate and Rhoda Jore arrived in Jinja, Uganda, on Nov. 4. For updated news on their ministry, visit www.aflc.org/worldmissions.

AFLC Memorials October

AFLBS

Albert Bartsch Alfred Johnson Leo Moe June Bodsberg Grams Torkelson Kenneth Tweed (2) Olga Hagen Phil Dyrud Ruby Holmaas (2)

AFLTS

Albert Bartsch Ruby Holmaas (5)

Evangelism

Barbara Gerdeen

General Fund

Johanna Swenson Barbara Gerdeen

Home Missions

Barbara Gerdeen Clara Ekenstedt Vera Hunter

WMF

Bennie McCarlson Eleanor Aukland Raymond Anderson Bryce Kiefel

Parish Education

Barbara Gerdeen Phil Dyrud Arnold Ivesdal

World Missions

Kenneth Tweed Arnold Ivesdal Barbara Gerdeen Betty Kopperud Alice Janzen Albert Bartsch Ruby Holmaas

... in honor of Virginia Bartsch (AFLBS, AFLTS, World Missions) Carola Davidson

Huglen's 'Race' now available

Pastor Raynard Huglen, editor of the "Lutheran Ambassador" for 27 years, has compiled a collection of his writings in a new book, "The Race Before Us." The collection features



devotionals, tributes, travelogues, editorials, special articles and commentaries on the guiding principles of the AFLC.

"We as an Association are richer because of this book, a compendium of gems to be treasured by every member of the AFLC," wrote Loiell Dyrud, a Parish Education board

member, in a recent review.

The "Race" is available for \$5 plus tax and shipping from Ambassador Publications. Call (763) 545-5631 or write 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd., Plymouth, MN 55441, for more information.

AFLC BENEVOLENCES Jan. 1- Oct. 31, 2006

FUND	TOTAL (Subsidy)	REC'D IN OCTOBER	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	% Total
General Fund	\$325,700	\$25,806	\$269,000	83
Youth Ministries	57,949	2,847	48,937	84
Evangelism	98,330	7,074	73,442	75
Parish Education	96,477	9,154	74,609	77
Seminary	189,224	20,299	158,083	84
Bible School	296,257	26,920	267,234	90
Home Missions	293,287	23,440	217,209	74
World Missions	260,933	16,380	192,476	74
Personal Support	376,641	44,596	373,584	99
TOTALS	\$1,944,798	\$176,517	\$1,674,573	84
TOTALS 2005	\$1,860,474	\$156,653	\$1,606,105	86

Goal 83%

These are the Annual Conference-approved budgets but do not reflect all the financial needs of the departments. Contact the individual departments for further information.

2007 Ambassador Schedule

Issue Date	Deadline	Issue theme
January	November 27	The Arts
February	December 18	AFLC Schools
March	January 29	Lent/Easter
April	February 26	Missions
May	March 26	Calling leadership
June	April 23	Evangelism
July	May 28	Christian Education
August	June 25	Conference Review
September	July 23	Youth/FLY
October	August 27	Book Review
November	September 24	Reform./Thanksgiving
December	October 29	Advent/Christmas

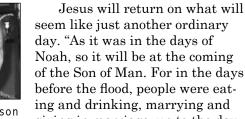
Please be in prayer for each issue of the Lutheran Ambassador. If you have any noteworthy news items about your congregation to submit, please do so within one month of the event's happening. Please submit news items of upcoming events at least two months prior to the issue's date. To contact the editors, call (763) 545-5631, or email ruthg@aflc.org or craigi@teleport.com.

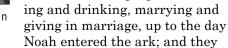
anymoment ARE YOU READY FOR THE LORD'S RETURN?

ne time I was at a friend's house and I went to use the bathroom. When I came out I didn't see anybody else around. My first thought was, "Maybe my friend was raptured. Maybe women and children go first and in just a moment the Lord will come and take me." I seriously thought that, and I was kind of excited. But then my friend came back into the house from the garage. She was still on this Earth. The rapture — that time when the Lord will return and take His children out of this Earth to be with Him — is still to come.

It didn't happen that afternoon. But it could have.

Maybe it'll be this afternoon. It will happen one of these days.







Pastor Craig Johnson

knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left" (Matthew 24:37-41, NIV).

That day will begin ordinary but become extraordinary. Which day that will be we do not know.

People are always trying to guess when Christ will return. During the height of the Cold War many were saying the former Soviet Union was "the great bear of the north" and the fulfillment of prophecies. Some claimed Jesus would come within a generation (40 years) of the founding of the nation of Israel in 1948. Now some believe tensions in the Middle East and the situation in Iran, Iraq and Israel are all indications that Jesus will come in the next few years.

One thing I know for sure is that Jesus said, "No one knows about that day or hour ... Therefore keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come ... So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him"

(Matthew 24:36, 42, 44).

We know the Lord will come soon, not because of what we read in the newspapers, but because of what we read in the Bible. Jesus said, "I will come back and take you to be with me" (John 14:3). He also said, "Behold, I am coming soon!" (Revelation 22:7).

The early Christians expected their time on this earth would end with the Lord's return, not with their death. The Thessalonians were surprised when some died before the Lord returned. Paul was inspired by God to tell them to not "be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope." He also, though, showed what he thought would happen as he wrote, "We who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord ..." (I Thessalonians 4:13, 15). He expected the Lord would return during his lifetime.

Is that what you expect? Are you ready for that day? You can be when you repent of your sins and trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

When Jesus came the first time, most missed it. Many were busy registering for the census and with all the affairs of life. When Jesus comes the second time it will be different. "Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him" (Revelation 1:7). But during this time of preparation, many are so busy with the affairs of life they're not ready. Don't be in that group. Be sure you're ready for the glorious day that is soon to come.

May the Lord bless you with a wonderful Advent and Christmas season.



something to share

Immanuel Christmas

BY PASTOR JOE OCKER

erry Christmas? As I write this in late October, the world, the devil and our sin has been providing ample reminders that Christmas may not be a merry time for all. Financial stress may be stalking your checking account, relationships may be full of wrestling and pain, illness may be challenging your daily outlook or bringing grief into your life. Is there a word in the midst of Christmas that can minister to you? Yes, there is, and the word is *Immanuel*.

Now hang on, don't bail out yet! You might be thinking, "Oh yeah, that 'God with us' stuff. Baby Jesus, all cuddly and soft in His mother's arms. Yeah, God with us. That's cool. But how does that minister to me when I am facing real, live, big, ugly problems today?" Well, give Immanuel a chance before you check out.

The Bible uses the word Immanuel in more than one sense. Yes, there is the comfort of the cuddly baby Jesus who became flesh and dwelt among us. There is boundless comfort in Jesus on the cross, accomplishing for us what we could never hope to accomplish for ourselves: satisfaction for sin, redemption, and salvation. But children of God knew and trumpeted the name Immanuel, God with us, long before Jesus physically graced our planet. What did Immanuel mean to believers before Jesus' birth? A lot!

We need to be careful because there isn't a version of the Bible based on voice tone, but I have an idea of how Immanuel was understood in the Old Testament that is a little different then what we normally think of at Christmas. In Isaiah 8:5-10, God is at first speaking a chilling judgment on Israel. At the end of verse 8, I believe Isaiah inserts his own editorial comment, after having just spoken the judgment and being frightened by it. Isaiah says, "O Immanuel!" When disaster is expressed by his own lips toward his people and nation, Isaiah utters his desperate cry and hope, "O God be with us!"

Then Isaiah shifts gears in verses 9-10 and speaks to the nations whom God will use to bring the judgment to Israel. Those nations will, in turn, be judged by God, and

Isaiah declares three times that they should prepare to "be shattered." Let's follow verse 10, "Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us (Immanuel)." That use of Immanuel does not have in mind a cute and cuddly baby in a manger! It has in mind an avenging God who will release destruction and wrath on those who would harm God's children. In a very real sense Isaiah is saying to the nations, "You better watch out, Immanuel!"

This is the picture of Immanuel in many places in the Old Testament. Immanuel is a God who jealously and passionately loves His children. Immanuel is a God who does not long tolerate those who bring harm to His children. Immanuel is a God who hears the cries of His children and answers with love, power, grace, and righteousness. See where we're going? If you are not having a merry Christmas, maybe you are needing an Immanuel Christmas instead, an Old Testament Immanuel.

Would you like to have your socks knocked off by the power of Immanuel's love for you? Read II Samuel 22. David was at death's door as he was hounded by enemies and by a mental case named King Saul. When God delivered David, he experienced Immanuel. God "came down" and roared savagely at David's enemies. The picture in verses 8-16 is akin to a mother bear raging against wolves who are trying to harm her cubs. Study it, and see if you aren't amazed by the power of God's love displayed. Verses 17-20 are some of my favorite verses in all Scripture. I recommend them to you, and close with verse 20b, "He (God) rescued me, because He delighted in me."

He delights in you, little one. In your trial, in your joy, when you are merry and when you are struggling, Immanuel. And when you need a fierce warrior to protect you and bring you through, the love and presence of Immanuel will accomplish your need. Immanuel Christmas!

Ocker is pastor of Dell Lutheran, Frost, Minn.