

THE LUTHERAN 

DECEMBER 2007

AMBASSADOR

PROPHECY PAST PRESENT & FUTURE



The



sandlot

When I was a kid growing up in Minnesota, we lived two blocks from a park with a ball field called Fenlason Park.

We rode our bikes almost every day to that park, growing and laughing, striving and learning, rising and falling as children. There at Fenlason, which we mispronounced and shortened to “Fennelson,” we played sandlot baseball, touch football, pick-up hoops, and frozen-fingered hockey in the winter. Any day of the week you could find 15 to 20 kids there. It was both good and bad because you learned independence — life without adults.

Pick-up sports in the 1970s taught us to lead, create, improvise. In a low-cost way, kids could grow and develop leadership, make friends, and learn to lose. No weekend road trips, no desperate coaches, no die-hard dads ruining games with arguments. Kids became the arbiters. Greg Doerffener was our star and judge. Mike Curti was the peacemaker, an exceptional shortstop, and a compelling leader. They kept us in line.

But it was bad, too. Kids without adults degenerate. We needed support. Just like believers in Jesus, we needed eyes, mentors and personal guides. Christians can get lost in a Sunday morning crowd. We need moms, big brothers and caring coaches. By the time some of my friends reached their early teens, they fell into drugs, selfish sins and wasted lives. Fenlason Park became their hideout.

Scripture says believers can't grow without supervision and caring relationships. “Obey your leaders and submit to

them, for they keep watch over your souls,” says Hebrews 13:17, “as those who will give account.” Romans 12:5 says, “We who are many are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” Romans 13:3 says “Rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil.” And in I Thessalonians 2, the Apostle Paul says that his team “proved to be gentle” as “nursing mothers” (verse 7) and that they spent their time “exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one” as a “father would his own children.”

We need help. We need direction.

That's the reason I sense God leading people in our church toward building regular participation in small groups. We have 20 small groups going. Some meet on Sunday morning during Sunday school, some meet on Wednesday nights. We have a small group for men at Denny's and a small group for friends that gathers at a coffee shop. We have a video series on relationships on Sunday afternoons and a study called “Doing Life Together” that meets in a new housing tract. We have groups for kids and a huddle for moms and daughters. Some senior friends meet on Tuesdays.

If you're not growing, the reason could be that you lack leadership and support. Is God calling you to join or start a small group? As a pastor, I have not found many Christians who can grow without such an accountability group.

Step out of that Fenlason Park independence. Jesus wants to connect us with people who will “keep watch over our souls.” Your new small group is waiting.

Johnson serves Good Shepherd Lutheran, Camarillo, Calif.

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The Creator has become a creature. The Lord of heaven, whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, became a fellow-citizen on earth. He, the true Father who is over all, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, became a child of man.

— C.F.W. Walther
“The Word of His Grace”

God became man; the divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. ... The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets.

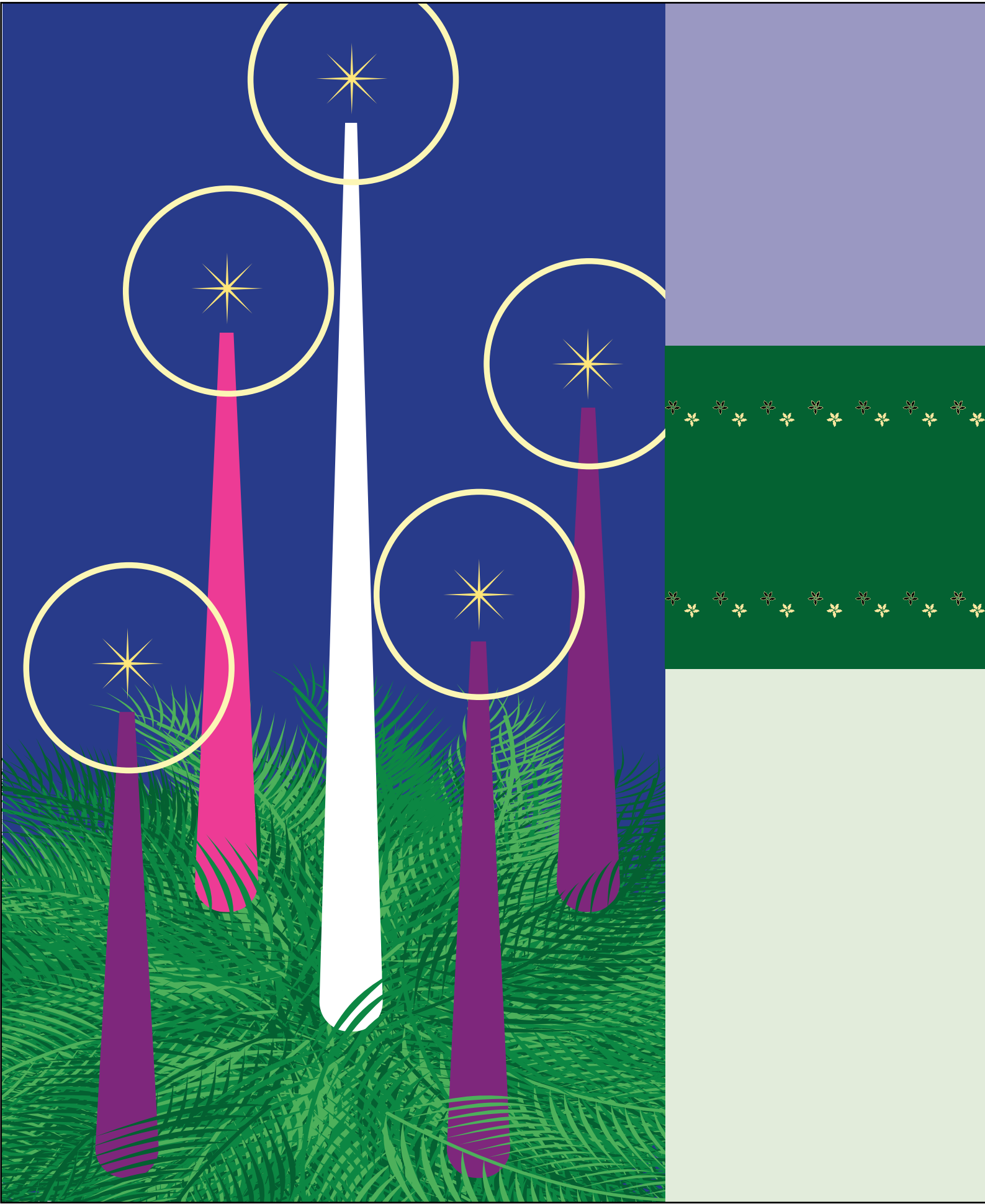
— J.I. Packer
“Knowing God”

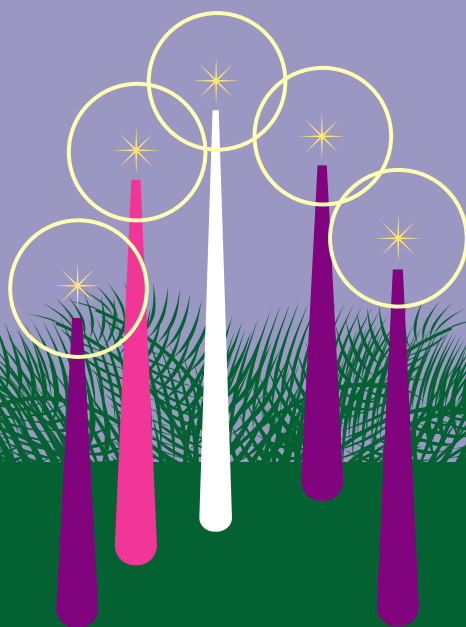
God became a man. While the creatures of earth walked unaware, Divinity arrived. Heaven opened herself and placed her most precious one in a human womb.

— Max Lucado
“God Came Near”

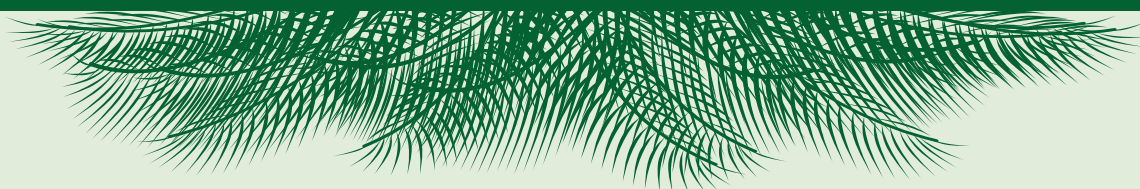
It is insufficient for us to say that God stands in a special intimate relationship to this man Jesus; God is this man.

— Carl F. Wisloff
“I Know in Whom I Believe”





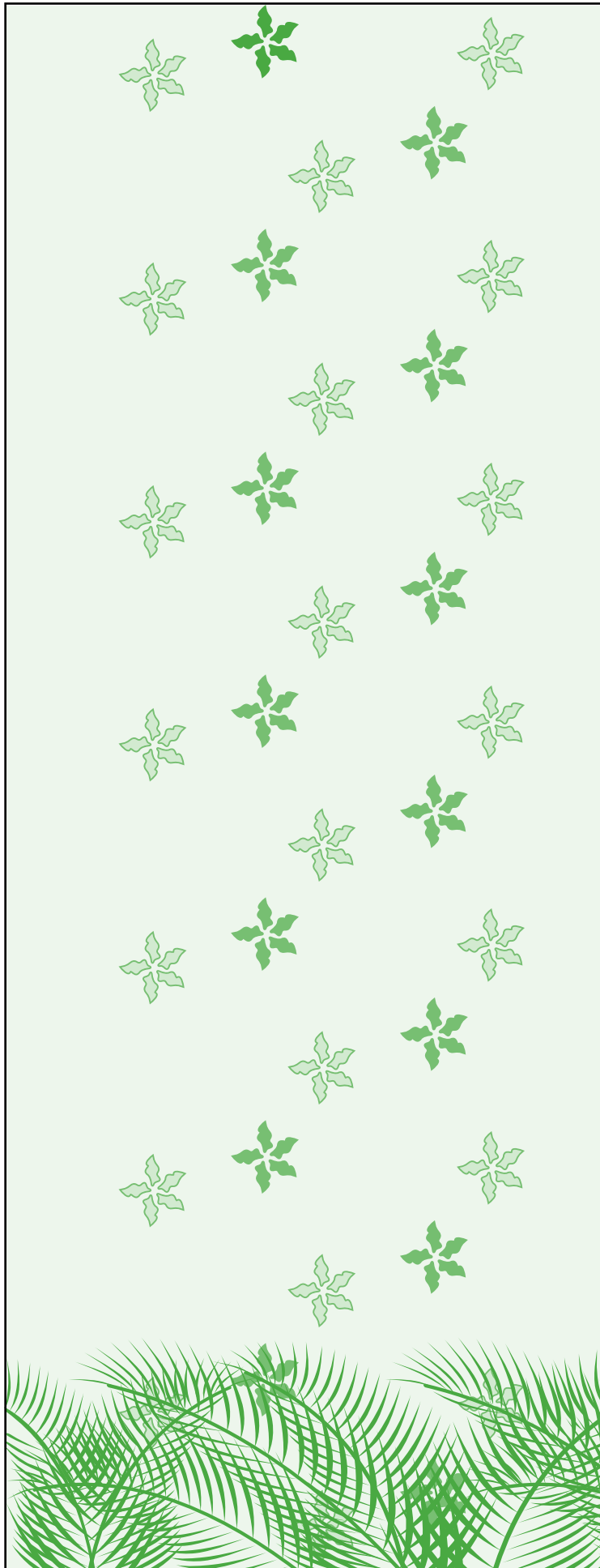
AN ADVENT STORY



BY CLARA GUNDERSON

Hi, Mom. I'm home!" Cara came through the door kicking her shoes off, threw her book bag on the floor and plopped down on the kitchen chair. Charlie, the family's friendly dog, came wiggling his tail, waiting for her to give him a loving pat.

Just then Mom walked in from the storeroom, boxes piled high in her arms. Putting them down she gave her daughter a quick kiss saying, "Hey, you're home already? I made some caramel rolls — they're on the counter. Have one with some milk."



"I know," Cara grinned. "I can smell them. Yum! Yum! Too bad Cole's still at practice!"

"Oh, I know you," answered Mom. "You'll save him the biggest one."

Opening one of the boxes, Mom pulled out a rolled-up burlap hanging and laid it over the back of a chair. As she opened the next box, Cara jumped up, exclaiming, "Our old candle holder! Is it time to set it up again, Mom?"

"Yes it is; next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent, so we'll light the first candle then. I could use some help setting it all up. Finish your snack and we'll do it."

Mom continued rummaging in the boxes, pulling out various decorations, while Cara drank the last of her milk.

"Are we going to use red candles again this year?" she asked.

"Let's talk about that with Dad and Cole at dinner tonight. Dad found a book at the bookstore with some ideas. Here's a basket — let's go outside and get a few evergreen boughs for our wreath around the candelabra."

Taking Charlie with them, they went into the backyard and filled the basket. "Looks like we've got plenty," Mom said. "We'll get more later when we get our tree and decorate the house. And, we'll get the holly then, too."

"Shall we put it in the middle of the table?" suggested Cara as they went inside.

"It would look nice there alright," said Mom, "but I like to set it up on the round table in the corner. It will have its own special place and we can hang the Advent calendar next to it. What do you think?"

"I like it!" Cara exclaimed. "It's just perfect with that dark green cloth over the table."

Mom picked up the tablecloth and headed for the utility room. "Cara, you go ahead and put your books away while I give this a quick iron."

Finishing, Mom found Cara playing with Charlie. "Okay, little one, I'll put the cloth on and you bring over the candle holder. Be sure not to pick off the old wax."

"I remember, Mom. And I remember Daddy telling us how Grandma wouldn't let him and Uncle Peder do it, either. She said it was more beautiful that way, didn't she?"

"Yes, and she said it reminded her of all the years they



WHAT LIES BEHIND THE TRADITION?

used it when Daddy was young. It's pretty old, just made of rough wood, but Dad's family started using it years ago when they lived in Mexico. Daddy has lots of good memories of how they used to celebrate Advent and Christmas when he was little."

"I love the story of Grandma singing the animal song," Cara said. "I'm going to ask Dad to tell it again tonight!"

"Good idea. I love it, too," Mom replied. "Now, while I get dinner started, you do your reading, and then when Dad and Cole get home we'll finish up the Advent center."

Later, at the dinner table, the family talked about what Advent is and why it is so special. Dad brought out the book he'd bought and he showed them some ideas of how to make an Advent worship center. They had usually used red candles for each of the four Sundays, with a white one in the center for the Christ child. Now they learned that another tradition was to use purple for the first three Sundays and a rose colored candle for the last Sunday, and, the white one in the center to be lighted on Christmas in honor of the birth of Jesus. This tradition used Hope, Love, Peace and Joy as the themes for the four candles.

"Who can remember what the themes were that we used last year?" asked Dad.

Cole was quick to respond. "I know one was Bethlehem, and one was the Shepherds, but I can't remember which was first."

"One definitely was for the Angels," Cara added.

"You are both right," Dad said. "Here's the order the book gives: Prophecy, Bethlehem, Shepherds, Angels."

Mom interrupted asking, "Does the book say anything about why we celebrate Advent or when it started?"

"I couldn't find out very much about when Advent started," Dad said. "There is just a quick mention that the early Christian church felt that to celebrate Christ's birth, His death and His resurrection regularly would make His life more real — not so it would be a repetition, but that as Christians we would live the faith story in a new and fresh way each year. We are called the

Christian Church because Christ is our Savior and Lord."

"The word 'Advent' means 'coming'," Mom added. "You know how excited you get when your own birthday is coming near. That's what we do these weeks before Christmas — we get excited and make plans for the celebration of Christmas. Also, it is a time to remember and talk about how Jesus is going to come back a second time and take His children to heaven. That's what the Prophecy candle stands for — telling the good news of salvation through the Messiah, Jesus Christ."

"That is something to look forward to for sure," Dad said. "I see you have already put up our old Advent calendar, too, Mom."

"Oh, Dad, please tell us again about Grandma singing the animal song!" Cara exclaimed.

Dad chuckled as he remembered. "Well, we always took turns reading the verses tucked into the pockets, and then we could place the Christmas symbol anywhere on the tree. Each of the animals in 'The Friendly Beast' carol was there — the donkey, the cow, the sheep and the dove. When

Grandma's turn came, she always sang the whole verse and we kids would groan, 'cause even Grandma knows that she can't ever hit the right notes!

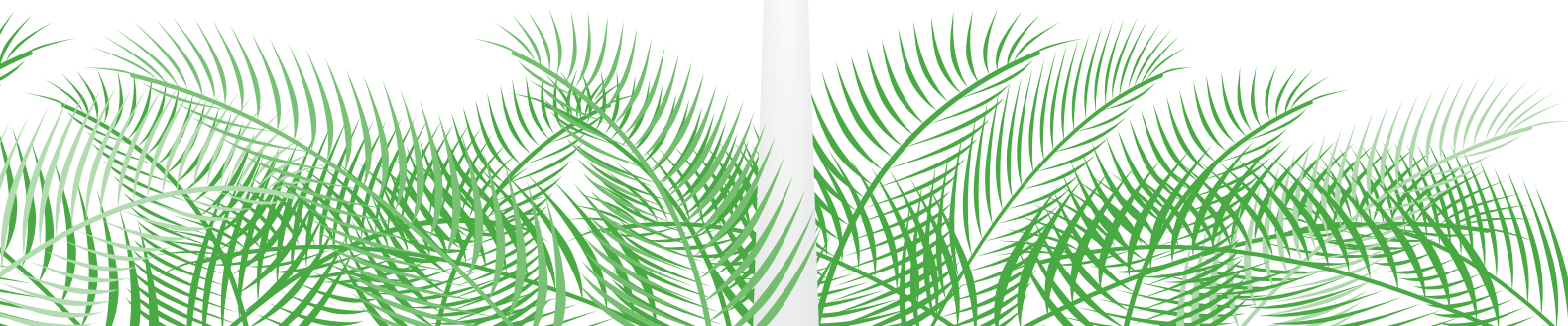
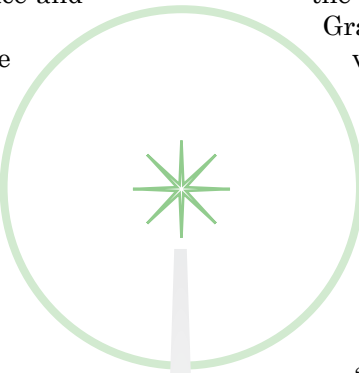
"One of the symbols was a little white Bible, and she always insisted that it be put on the trunk of the tree because God's Word is the very basis of our faith."

"Oh, I miss Grandma and Grandpa," said Cara.

"Me, too!" said Cole.

"I know, but they'll be here for the Christmas program, and we'll have dinner first and light the Advent candles. We'll sing 'The Friendly Beasts' together and celebrate the coming of Christmas once again."

Gunderson is a member of Sunnyside Free Lutheran, Stacy, Minn.



MINOR PROPHET MAJOR STORY



BY PASTOR JERRY HOLMAAS

“But you,
O Bethlehem
Ephrathah, who
are too little to be
among the clans
of Judah, from
you shall come
forth for me one
who is to be ruler
in Israel, whose
coming forth is
from of old, from
ancient days”
(Micah 5:2).



A little-known prophet named Micah from a little-known rural village southwest of Jerusalem, in the southern kingdom of Judah, first spoke these words from Micah 5:2 sometime in the second half of the 8th century B.C. — and some 2,700 years later Christians regularly read them during the season of Advent. In Micah's day, Bethlehem Ephrathah (the second name seems to be either an alternate name for Bethlehem or the name of the district in which Bethlehem was located) was insignificant in terms of power or size. The little town was known only as the birthplace of David. As we shall discover, this was of vital importance to Micah (and to the Holy Spirit "breathing out" God's Word through him). Perhaps this accounts for the use of two names for this place — it is of utmost importance that each hearer and reader get it right.

Micah was prophesying the birthplace of one who would come forth from God and be ruler in Israel. This coming one would not be just another boy child (the Hebrew makes clear that it is a male being prophesied). The prophet's words have the strong hint of eternity about them. We Christians rightly see in these words a prophecy of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, and a suggestion of his deity. We rightly see a remarkable prediction of his birthplace.

Perhaps we wonder: what did Micah understand when he first uttered this simple sentence? Did this relatively obscure and humble servant of the God of Israel grasp much of the import of his simple words — or did he simply say them as some sort of automaton, just parroting a sentence about a coming ruler who would have a strange pre-history and be born in an insignificant village?

While we can, of course, never know with certainty how much any of the biblical authors understood of their prophecies, a careful analysis of the literary structure of Micah (i.e. the way the book is put together, presumably by Micah himself) lets us in on a thrilling discovery. This little prophetic book, written some 700 years before Jesus was born of Mary in Bethlehem, is *very carefully arranged* so that Micah 5:2, on which we are focusing, is *literarily at the exact center of the book*. In other words, the prophet, guided mysteriously by God the Holy Spirit, so arranged his book that the careful reader couldn't miss it: *the Messiah is at the center; the entire message of the book points unmistakably to him!*

Lest the reader come to the erroneous conclusion that I discovered this truth on my own, I hasten to give credit where it is due. The scholar David Dorsey, in his book *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Baker Books, 1999), concisely analyzed each of the 39 books in the Old Testament collection. In his analysis of Micah he discovered a careful symmetry at

work. The prophet artfully arranged his various prophecies of judgment and blessing in such a way that earlier oracles are balanced by later ones and at the center point of the central section (chapters 4 and 5) occurs Micah 5:2. Indeed, in the Hebrew Masoretic text (upon which our English translations are based) chapter 4 ends with our English verse 5:1; our 5:2 is thus, in the Hebrew Bible, the first verse of the new chapter and is thus *precisely* at the center of the central discourse unit of the book.

The point to be noted is simply this: the book of Micah is most definitely not haphazardly arranged. While it is certainly a challenge to discover the careful arrangement of this short work, Dorsey's book has convinced me of the value of the effort.

"So what?" you may ask. Micah may well have arranged his prophecies in such a way that the precise center of his book is a verse stating the birthplace of a ruler we know as Jesus the Messiah. What's the big deal about that? Does one's birthplace really matter? Consider with me just two observations on which to reflect during this Advent season.

First, the long-promised Messiah would come from the line of David. In II Samuel 7:12-16, King David was promised by God that his throne would be established forever. This was the first of many promises linking the Messiah with David's lineage. Micah 5:2 simply added another promise to the list, connecting the coming ruler with David by predicting that he would be born in David's hometown. Micah carefully indicated that this was not to be considered coincidental — he made this fact the apex of his prophetic book.

Did God keep His promises? Where was Jesus born? Read Luke's nativity account (Luke 2:1-16) and pay special attention to how carefully Luke documents the city of our Lord's birth *and* its connection with King David. Isn't the application clear? Does God still keep His promises? Can there be any other answer than, "Of course!"

Second, take comfort this Advent season in the fact that "little is much when God is in it." Ponder the astounding blessings unleashed upon our world by a birth in a manger of an unknown barn, behind an unknown inn, to an obscure couple. To this add the fact that some 700 years earlier a little-known prophet said this is exactly where the birth would occur — and he was exactly right!

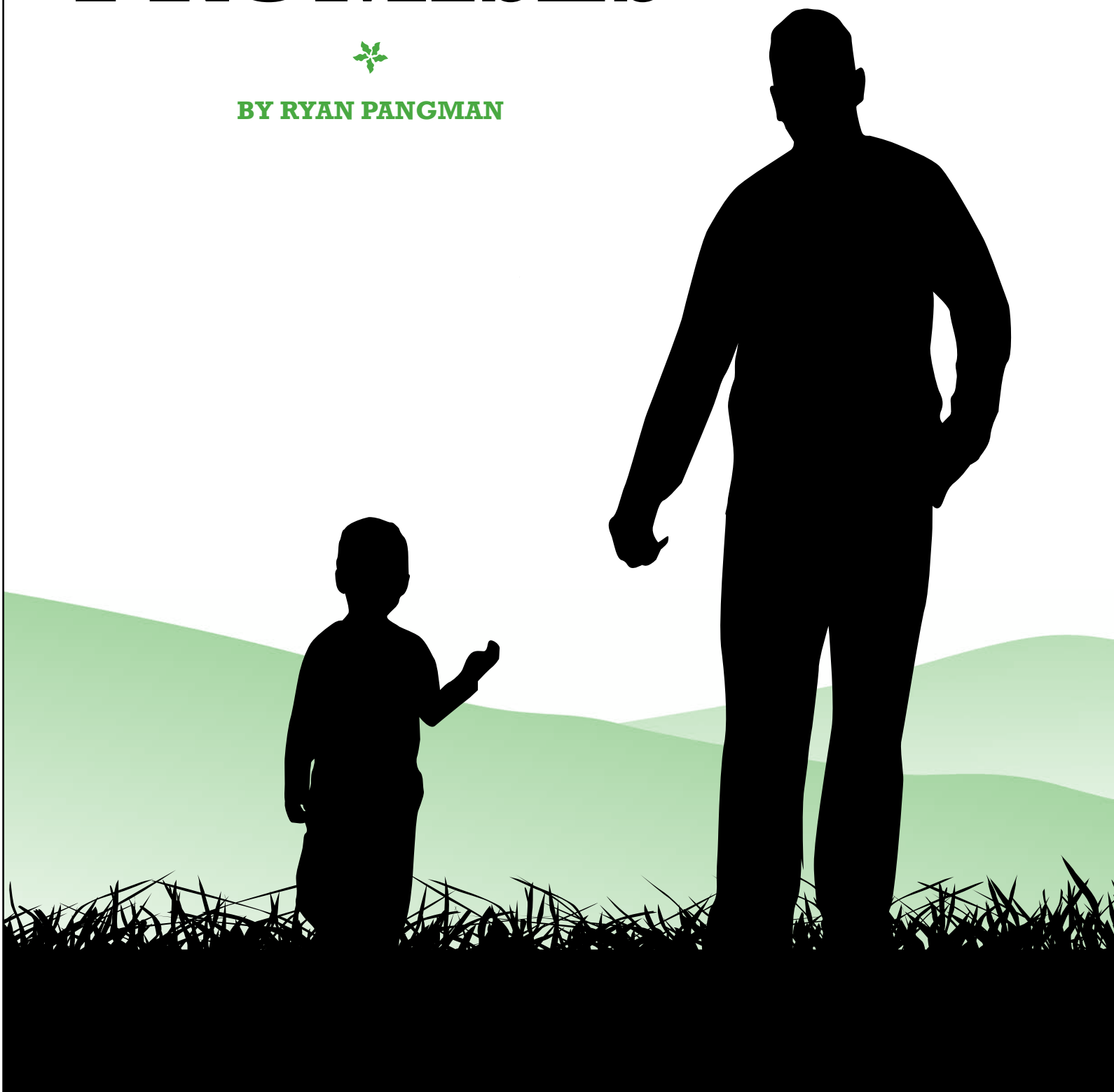
Take comfort and encouragement throughout this Advent season in this: God can and will use you in mighty ways for His kingdom — even if (in the world's eyes) you are a nobody born in a nowhere place to nobodies. God still uses "nobodies" from "nowhere places" who trust in Him (reflect on I Corinthians 1:28-31). God still keeps every one of His promises. Reflect on II Corinthians 1:20: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in [Jesus Christ]."

Holmaas, Brooklyn Park, Minn., is a member of the faculty at the AFLC Schools in Plymouth, Minn.

UNBROKEN PROMISES



BY RYAN PANGMAN



I remember my head was down as I sat in the passenger seat of my father's red Dodge pick-up truck. We were sitting outside of my mother's house in a Chicago suburb. My father and mother had been divorced for a little more than six years by then. He had moved on to another marriage and was just about to move on from my life.

My father, who had decided to retire from fire fighting to become an open road truck driver, was saying his last goodbye. Tears were running down my cheeks as I thought back to the day he promised me that he would always be around — even though he wasn't going to be married to my mother anymore.

As we sat in the truck, I knew that this would be one of the last times I would be able to spend a lot of time with him. He was breaking his promise, leaving me broken.

I am 21 years old now. I've graduated from high school, attended a year at AFLBS and am on a career path. I look back on those days when I used to cry over broken promises and see another broken promise. My father divorced my mother after 19 years of marriage. With that broken promise came a lot of tears, pain and trials in my life.

I was 9 years old when my father divorced my mother, and I remember how lost and confused I was. I was too young to understand the magnitude of divorce. But what I wasn't confused about was the terrible pain. My mother, who did her best, was going through her own problems from the divorce. There were times when we lived without heat, electricity and water. As a young kid I used to try to figure out why I had been given this brokenness.

In my teens I started to go to St. Olaf Free Lutheran Church in Montgomery, Ill. There, Pastor Brian Pearson took hold of me and helped me become the man I am today. He became the father in this world that I was missing. He showed me the love that I longed for, and he got me active in youth group. From there I started to understand who God is and what God has to offer.

During a trip to the FLY convention in Estes Park, Colo., I found Christ as my personal Savior.

After accept-

ing Jesus in my life, I started to find out about His *unbroken promises*. Coming home from that convention, I started to understand my faith and mature into a man of God. I began to understand that just because I was a Christian, it didn't mean I wasn't going to have to go through the roller coaster of life. But there is a purpose to those trials I had to endure.

You may be wondering what those purposes are. Well, the purpose is to expose others to the amazing unbroken promises that God has not only given to me, but you as well. The purpose is to tell people that I have been blessed to be able to go through the things I have gone through. I want to let people know that God has given us many rich and powerful promises, promises He will not break.

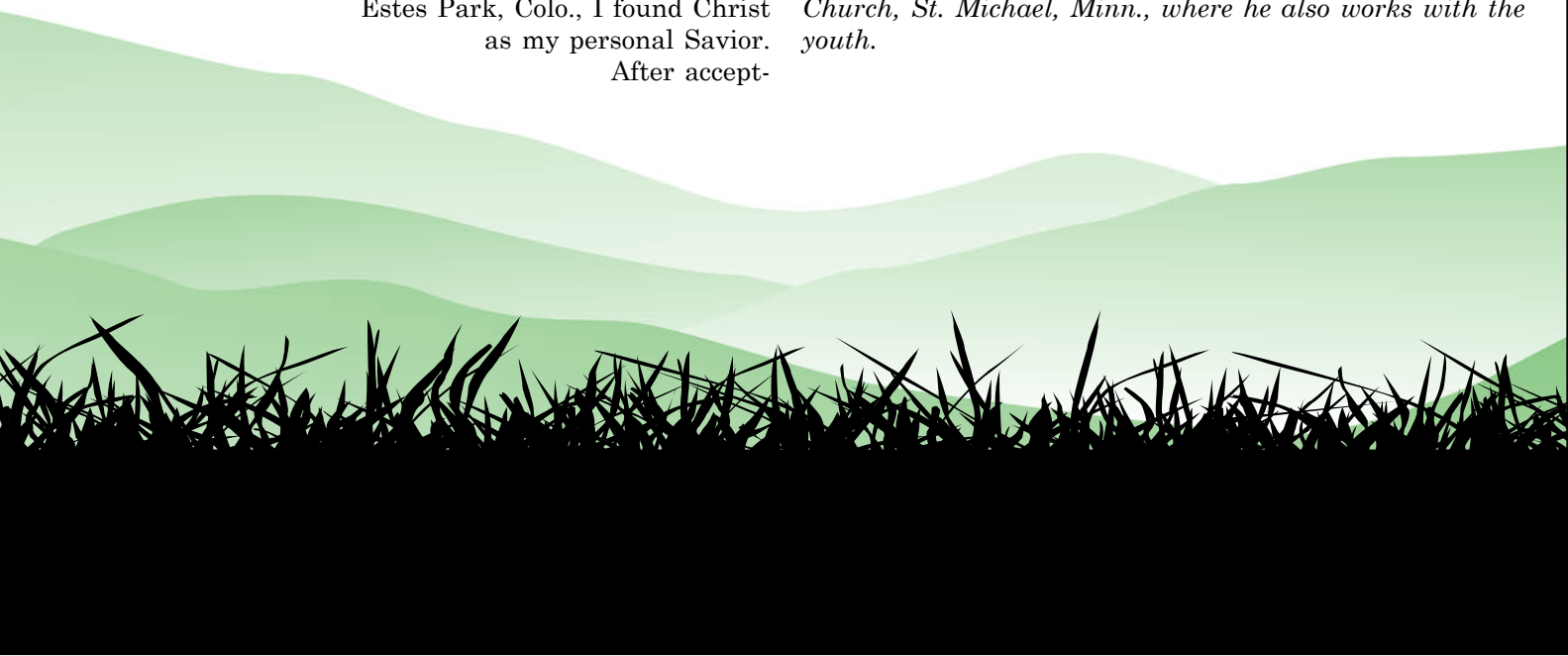
Even as I sit in the corner of a coffee shop on a rainy October night, I'm thinking about God's promises. One of those promises that comes to mind is John 3:16, which tells us, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

I know we've all heard that passage time after time, but take a moment to ponder that powerful promise! My heart drops when I think about it. God loved me, Ryan Matthew Pangman, so much that He gave His only Son for me. He promised to send His Son. He kept that promise.

I remember telling my father on that terrible day that I loved him and how much I would miss him. It was terrible knowing I wouldn't feel loved by him like I wanted. As he pulled away from my driveway and as I watched that red Dodge drive away, I cried for hours. But now I know that I will always have the love and the promises of my true father, God.

He promised to come again. He will keep that promise, too. He will never leave us nor forsake us, and that, my friends, brings me more tears of joy than any tears I have cried over broken promises.

Pangman, Plymouth, Minn., is a member of Living Hope Church, St. Michael, Minn., where he also works with the youth.



✿ BY PASTOR JAMES MOLSTRE

HE CAME, HE COMES, HE WILL



Iwalked into Macy's this year on September 30. The Christmas trees were up, decorated with beautiful ornaments — on sale, 20 percent off! There were cardboard cutouts of Santa Claus and his reindeer hanging from the ceiling, and angels trumpeting this happy time of year. The message was clear, "Shop early, shop often, it's never too early to begin your Christmas shopping."

We spend months preparing for Christmas. We give a great deal of thought to buying presents, making cookies, decorating the house and making travel plans. Preparing far in advance for Christmas is not novel to contemporary society. Centuries ago, the faithful would begin preparation for the great feast of Christmas months in advance.

The celebration of Christ's birth on December 25 was introduced as a special feast in Rome around the middle of the fourth century. The idea of celebrating the birth of our Savior was obviously very popular, and the tradition spread rapidly through the Roman Empire. It soon became one of the main events of the Christian year, and it was thought that a time of spiritual preparation ought to take place prior to the great feast.

Bishop Perpetuus issued the regulation that a fast should be held three days every week from November 11 until Christmas. This practice of fasting before Christmas became popular and spread all over Europe with different starting dates. Some began the fast the first of December,

some in November, some as early as September. It

was also understood that this was not only a time of celebration, but a time of penitence. Bishop Burchard of Worms (1025) issued the following regulation: "In the Quadragesima before Christmas you must abstain from wine, ale, honey-beer, meats, fats, cheese, and from fat fish." (I guess skinny fish were allowed.) The

faithful were also bound to abstain from weddings, amusements, and pleasure travel during this time of fasting.

Over time, the penitential aspect of Advent was de-emphasized, while the celebratory aspect was emphasized even more.

By the 6th century, the name Advent, or "coming," was given to this time of preparation. Advent originally was cele-

brated exclusively for the coming of Christ in His birth. But, in time, various preachers and writers expanded its meaning to include the threefold Advent of Christ. This advent includes His past coming, in Bethlehem; His future coming, at the end of time; and His present coming, through grace in the hearts of believers. There has been disagreement between sincere Christians as to whether Old Testament prophecies are to be applied to Christ's first advent, his second advent or both. Some believe that during the Advent season we should only be focusing upon Christ's birth. Others prefer to focus on both his first and second coming.

The primary focus of Advent is that in an awesome act of grace, God became man so that he could take all of our sins upon himself and pay the full price demanded of us — death. Advent focuses our attention on the work of Christ 2,000 years ago. We read the familiar Advent passages of Scripture such as Isaiah 9:2, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined." This verse serves as a reminder of the darkness of our sin. Jesus came as a baby, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" in order to die for our sins. We who are in darkness can experience the light of the salvation won for us by Christ on the cross.

Advent also can focus our attention upon His second coming. While our Savior was still on earth, He talked about His second coming often. Christ's second coming was not to be a point of contention, as it often is among fellow believers today. It was intended to be a doctrine of comfort and peace. In John 14, while reassuring His disciples, Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." These, I'm sure, were words that gave the disciples hope and calmed their troubled minds. They do the same for me, as I hope they do for you.

In God's plan, all of these events — the birth, death, resurrection, and second coming of Christ — are inextricably tied together. They are all a part of God's design to save His people from their sin. We focus on Christ's birth at Christmas, but His death, resurrection and second coming are tied together with God's plan for His Son.

In this plan, we see a God who loves us so much that it causes His people to sing, "O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord."

Molstre, Pittsburgh, Pa., serves Ruthfred Lutheran Church, Bethel Park, Pa.



COME



BY PASTOR CRAIG JOHNSON

ENDURE TODAY

HYMNWRITER PAUL GERHARDT TURNS 400



At least the tough times don't last forever. The one who is trusting in Christ finds comfort in that and is confident that change is on the way. Jesus is coming again.

The truth of Jesus' return brought Paul Gerhardt encouragement in the midst of terrible suffering. It became a theme in much of the writing of the man known as "the Prince of Lutheran Hymnwriters."

Gerhardt was born in Germany in 1607 and graduated from the University of Wittenberg in 1642. He studied theology with the intention of being a pastor, but the Thirty Years War was raging and all of Germany was suffering. He was unable to secure a parish and served for several years as a tutor. During that time he came in contact with the Lutheran cantor and organist, Johann Cruger. Cruger was impressed with Gerhardt's hymn writing and poetry and used 18 of them in his book titled, *Praxis Pietatis Melica* (Practical Pious Songs).

In *The Concordia Companion*, Don Rodvold, the AFLC School's first music director, wrote regarding Gerhardt:

"Three years after the war he took his first parish. Six years later he became third assistant at a large church in Berlin. His stock of hymns grew. So did their popularity, as well as his own. His preaching drew large audiences.

"The controversy between the Lutherans and the Calvinists flared up again as a result of the effort of Elector Friedrich Wilhelm, a Calvinist, to unite the factions. He sought to compel the clergy to sign an oath that they would no longer preach on doctrinal differences. Gerhardt, always moderate in his speech, nevertheless felt it a political act which was compromising the faith, and he refused and was soon removed from his call.

"To add to his sorrows, Gerhardt's wife and son died during this upheaval. Three other children had died earlier, and now he was left with a 6-year-old son. After struggling along for two years he was called to a small rural church at Lubben, where he ministered faithfully to a congregation described ... as 'a rough and unsympathizing people.' After eight years there he died in 1676.

"In the midst and totality of this difficult life he managed to write 130 of the finest and most beloved hymns of perfect peace and joy, which neither trials nor persecution could squelch."

Gerhardt wrote the Advent hymn "O How Shall I

Receive Thee," no. 3 in the *Ambassador Hymnal*. This hymn, characteristic of Gerhardt's hymns and unique for its day, has some subjective expression, as demonstrated by its use of the personal pronoun, "I." It speaks of the need for personal preparation for the coming of Christ: "O how shall I receive Thee, how greet Thee, Lord, aright?" The objective truth of God's love is applied personally: "Love caused Thine incarnation, love brought Thee down to me; Thy thirst for my salvation procured my liberty." The hymn also speaks of how that truth applies to all people. "O love beyond all telling that led Thee to embrace, In love all love excelling, our lost and fallen race."

As he wrote the hymn Gerhardt did not hide the fact that he had faced many trials. "Rejoice then, ye sadhearted, who sit in deepest gloom, Who mourn o'er joys departed and tremble at your doom." He who had experienced much sorrow and lived in a land torn apart by strife and war knew what it meant to be "sadhearted" and "sit in deepest gloom." He also knew where to turn to find joy in the midst of the pain: "My soul puts off her sadness Thy glories to proclaim." As he proclaimed the glories of Christ, Gerhardt found strength to endure.

"He who alone can cheer you is standing at the door; He brings his pity near you, and bids you weep no more." Gerhardt knew of Christ's First Advent. "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (John 1:14, NIV). The merciful and compassionate Lord came to our hurting world. The One who alone can cheer us has come near.

Gerhardt looked forward to Christ's Second Advent. He knew a day was coming when those in Christ would "weep no more." "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4). Gerhardt grieved, but not "like the rest of men, who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). He knew "the Lord himself will come down from heaven ..."

As we go through this life with its difficult trials, it is good to remember one who walked a challenging path 400 years ago. The truth of Jesus' return that Gerhardt wrote of and found comfort in can encourage and strengthen us, as well.

Johnson, editor, serves Bethany Free Lutheran, Astoria, Ore.

THE STARS SHONE SO EXTRA BRIGHTLY



TRANSLATED BY
PASTOR RAYNARD HUGLEN

The storm winds were so strong that the house shook. The waves of the sea were high even though the fjord lay sheltered from the North Sea nearby. The rain lashed the wall and windows in one blow. It was no use to take an umbrella if one was going outside; regular oilskins must be put on. And this was supposed to be Christmas weather!

In the parsonage the lamp in the living room was lit. The large stove with the crackling birch wood in it was doing its best to keep the big room warm with its four bay windows. The draft from them could be felt anyway in that storm.

The pastor's wife sat with some handwork. She was, so to say, ready with the butchering and baking

for Christmas and with the day's business, also. She wasn't the kind who waited until the last minute to get everything in order. The saying, "It arrived on her like Christmas Eve to an (old) woman," didn't fit her when something should be made ready.

Now she sat and waited for the pastor, who hadn't felt at peace to stay home, but had to go out on a sick call even though the weather was so terrible. He thought, perhaps, that the mayor, who before was such a stalwart and strong man deep within, wished that the pastor would come, even if he wasn't one to "bother the pastor." Lars Bue seldom asked him to come; not today, either.

Lars Bue had been something of a giant to look on. He didn't spare himself, neither when it involved work on his farm nor when it dealt with the management of the district's business. But now he lay there, pale and emaciated, coughing and struggling for breath, sweat on his brow and clammy



hands. The scourge of the time — tuberculosis, consumption — had seized him also, like so many others in the district.

It wasn't so easy for Lars, especially when things weren't so hopeful in his home. Thinking about his wife and six children left without provision often made his spirit heavy — oh yes, bitter also now and then. Why should this happen to me now? God, has He anything to do with this, since He could well have spared me?

Now it was only a few days before Christmas. No, there likely wouldn't be any Christmas at their place. He barely endured that the children walked over the floor in the next room and talked of having a Christmas tree, carols, and hustle and bustle. Mostly in secrecy Mother had done a little baking — *fattigmann*, *hjortetak* and such. The children were permitted to be in the kitchen. There they felt most at ease with Mother, even though they enjoyed Lina so much, too.

Lina was from a district to the south and had worked for the Bues for several years, taking care of one little one after another. But now she was the nurse for Lars. She had such an unusually good knack both for fixing the bed and fluffing the pillow, leaving them in such a way that the thin body found rest. And sometimes she could only come with a comforting and encouraging word when gloomy thoughts discouraged him.

At last the pastor returned. He removed his outdoor clothes and boots, and washed his hands before he entered.

"Oh, no, it isn't going well up there with Lars," he said. "It will be a dreary Christmas for all of them, and worst of all for the children who don't realize how sick their father is. It is as though a depression is coming over him more and more. What do you say, Mother, to inviting all the children and Lina down here for Christmas Eve? Lina surely needs a little time of relief, so confined as she is day and night."

"Certainly, would you ask them, for I surely don't have anything against it. I have thought of it myself, but didn't want to mention it. You would rather have things as still as possible Christmas Eve in order to ready your sermon for Christmas Day and the other days in Christmas."

Ten-year-old Ellen had been sitting in the room with her lessons, but couldn't help overhearing the conversation. Then she began to speak,

"Invite them all over here for Christmas Eve! What a bustle and hard work that will be. And you, Mother, are often so tired. And you, Father, who always want it to be so quiet that night. And what does Kari in the kitchen say, do you think? Don't think she will be so glad, either."

Not much more was said after that. But next morning Father said to Ellen, "You must go up to Bues' when you are out of school and ask whether Lina can bring all the children with her down to the parsonage Christmas Eve afternoon, six o'clock."

Ellen had little desire to go. But she knew well enough that when Mother and Father had decided it, she mustn't object. When she came into the kitchen at Bues' and brought the invitation, big tears ran down from Mrs. Bue's eyes, tired and worried as she was. Ellen became very alarmed. Why was she crying? Had she said anything wrong? Oh no, she was only overwhelmed. Mrs. Bue had gone and dreaded what this Christmas might be, thinking of the children and her husband so sick. And then the invitation came!

Christmas Eve came. The weather had gone from rain to cold so that the roads were slippery and shiny with ice. How would they be able to come down the hill from the Bue's home to the parsonage? Oh yes, Lina knew a way to handle that also, as for so many things. She found some thick, worn out wool stockings, cut them up in long strips and wrapped them under the soles of the children's boots. For herself she put a few scale weights under her shoes so that she would be able to walk and help the others.

And here came the whole company! Ellen was to greet them at the entry for she knew them all and they wouldn't feel uncomfortable, as they would before husband and wife.

Clean and with hair combed they came. Lina took a last look at them before they went in — first Karen, the oldest, and then all five others afterward. The youngest, 3-year-old Lars, for safety's sake took a good hold on Lina's skirt. That was quite ceremonious, wasn't it? But the pastor and wife stood in the room and said hello and *velkommen* to every single one.

The long table stood decorated and set, and everyone was helped to a place. On practical grounds there were no ribs or chopped pork cakes and all that goes with

that. But there was a very large platter with delicious sandwiches with pressed meat, summer sausage and other good things on them, Norwegian spice cake and Christmas cake and chocolates, as much as any would want. Shyness disappeared after some slices of bread and chocolate were eaten. And when everyone was well satisfied, the pastor read the Christmas story and spoke a few words about the true Christmas Gift and the joy of Christmas, and prayed for them all — also for the one who lay sick.

And then he opened the double doors into the parlor. Oh, oh! There stood the lighted Christmas tree. Not a spruce tree, for that wasn't found around there, but a large beautiful fir tree with real candles. The light of the candles, the smell of the fresh fir tree, the warmth from the stove, all did their part so that a special spirit of the season fell over them all. And to be sure, the six pairs of children's eyes sparkled in competition with the lights!

"Can you sing, children?"

To be sure, they could. They didn't get tired of walking around the tree. With full hearts they sang, "I am so glad each Christmas Eve." At the last they all stood and sang, "Thy little ones, dear Lord, are we ..."


No one was used to so many and large Christmas presents in the country "in the old days." But there was a little package now for each one anyway. Ellen had recently celebrated her birthday and received a nice scarf, mittens and stockings — yes, and some nice hankies, too. Mother had asked her if she wouldn't like to share her gifts. She wasn't completely willing, but didn't dare to say no, either. And

she didn't regret it when she saw the happiness Karen had when she got the scarf, and Kaare and Svein. Little Knut, who was 5 years old, got a bag of raisins and nuts and was very glad. "Am I get all this alone?"

But what about a nutcracker? Strong teeth had to do the job, or otherwise Knut thought of another way. He laid a nut on the floor, sat beside it, lifted one foot high and used the heel of his boot as a hammer. It didn't bother him that this would send the shell here and there, and no one else made any objection, either, not then anyway.

The evening went and they took their departure. Lina was busy getting hats, mittens and scarves on all. Then there were deep bows and "*mange takk*" (many thanks), "good night" and "Merry Christmas!"

Outside it was bright starlight. Ellen stood on the steps and watched the guests as they went. She thought the stars shone so extra brightly and twinkled down to her especially. Christmas Eve, Christmas presents, Christmas joy. She felt an unaccustomed great and warm happiness flow through her. Tonight she had learned something of the secret of Jesus' words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," even if she hadn't comprehended that night the whole depth of the words. She learned that more fully later in life.



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"She Thought the Stars Shone So Extra Brightly: What Ellen Learned" was written by Johanne Høeg. It was translated from Norwegian by Pastor Raynard Huglen, Newfolden, Minn.

Our LEADER

Maringá, Brazil

BY PASTOR JONATHAN ABEL

John 16:33, “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

Certainly life is full of ups and downs. Upon returning to Brazil we found out that Doña Maria, a lady to whom we have been ministering, was diagnosed with cancer. Doña Maria is in her early 50s, but looks much older — signs of the tough life she has lived. She is a hard-working woman and the main bread winner of her home. This news shocked her family and saddened us all, but at the same time we see it as an opportunity for her to draw closer to God. We are waiting for the exam results to see if her cancer is malignant or benign. Please remember Doña Maria in your prayers.

We have also had many challenges as we help in the process of forming a national board for our Bible school and seminary. This has involved many meetings with Pastor Connely Dyrud and our national leaders, running to government offices and banks, a lot of standing in line, bus trips and making many long-distance phone calls around Brazil (Tamba doesn't want to see the phone bill this month). There have been concerns and uncertainties, but all in all, things are starting to fall into place and

come out quite well. There is an air of optimism as we complete the nationalization process for the seminary.

As for the church here in Maringá, things are going well and we are looking forward to the activities at the end of the year, which include a retreat, an annual congregational meeting and the Christmas program. Remember also the church in your prayers as we look for our own church home. In this world we have lots of battles and challenges, but we try to look at the upside. Christ is the General who goes before us winning the battles. What He asks of us is just to follow. That requires faith, but also brings joy.

Abel is an AFLC missionary to Maringá, Brazil.





Congregation marks Wentzel's years of service

Pastor Craig Wentzel and his wife, Barb, were honored for their 15 years of service by their congregation at Zoar Free Lutheran, Hampden, N.D., during the annual Harvest Festival service Oct. 28. Joni Haglin, a member of Zoar, wrote a special song and along with her children — Cassandra, Clarinda and Harvey — sang and accompanied the tribute.

Titled "Pastor Craig," part of the lyrics to the chorus are:

"The Lord sent us a shepherd
to lead our precious flock ...
I see a gifted writer; a student
of God's Word;
A teacher who believes in prayer;
A father and a husband;
a brother and a friend;
But most of all a Godly man."

PEOPLE AND PLACES

Members of **St. John's Lutheran**, Ambridge, Pa., celebrated the congregation's centennial anniversary on Nov. 4.

Members of **Good Shepherd Lutheran**, Pleasanton, Texas, celebrated the congregation's 20th anniversary on Oct. 28.

Pastor Kirk Thorson, a 2007 graduate of AFLTS, was installed at Living Faith Free Lutheran, Larimore, N.D., and Middle Grove Lutheran, Makinok, N.D., on Oct. 7. Pastor Elden Nelson, AFLC president, officiated at the services.

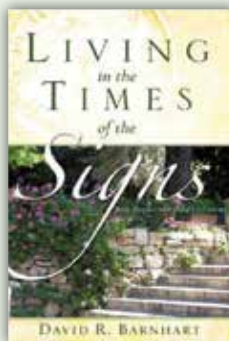
Pastor James Westgate was installed at St. Matthew Lutheran, Millerstown, Pa., on Nov. 4, with Pastor Elden Nelson, AFLC president, officiating.

Barnhart publishes book

We are living in exciting times. The present generation has witnessed the fulfillment of more prophetic signs than any generation in history, and no more significant sign has been fulfilled than the return of the Jews to the reestablished State of Israel.

AFLC Pastor David Barnhart's newest book, *Living in the Times of the Signs: Bible Prophecy for the 21st Century*, explains Bible prophecy as it applies to events unfolding in this century. It also investigates the present situation in Israel and the Middle East, offering insights into radical Islam and terrorism, as well as the moral and spiritual decline that is taking place in our culture and our churches.

Barnhart, president and founder of Abiding Word Ministries, has traveled to Israel 26 times and visited the sites of



the seven churches of Revelation. His experiences have equipped him to address pertinent issues of concern to every Christian. In his book, he offers answers to some vital questions: What is Israel's place in end-time events? What is Islam's role in Bible prophecy? When and

where will the temple be rebuilt? How will the Israeli/Palestinian conflict be resolved? How close are we to a global religion and a global government?

Published by Xulon Press, *Living in the Times of the Signs* is available through Abiding Word Ministries, P.O. Box 275, Canal Winchester, OH 43110 (1-800-253-6922). The book may also be ordered through any bookstore or on amazon.com (paperback ISBN: 978-160477-05-1-3; hardcover ISBN: 978-160477-052-0). For more information on Abiding Word Ministries, visit their website at www.thevineandbranches.org.

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► October memorials

AFLBS

Ingeborg Berge (10),
Bertha Anderson,
Lynda Hendrickson
Roth, Jerome Lillestol,
Pastor Bruce Peterson,
Donna Sellen,
James P. Johnson,
Rochel Pederson

AFLTS

Pastor Bruce Peterson
(7), Dr. Uuras and
Sirkka Saarnivaara

Home Missions

Ingeborg Berge,
John Gilbertson

Lutheran Ambassador

Bertha Anderson

Parish Education

Ingeborg Berge,
Pastor Bruce Peterson,
Bertha Anderson

WMF

Isabel Johnson,
Trygve Rorvig,
Carl Stenslie,
Betty Specht,
James Johnson,
Jemina Mork

World Missions

Pastor Bruce Peterson

Association Retreat Center posts 2008 schedule

Contact ARC for registration information

The Association Retreat Center, Osceola, Wis., has released the 2008 retreat schedule of events under the theme: "God's Plan of Salvation (Ephesians 2:4-5).

For more information on the retreats listed below, call (800) 294-2877 or visit the ARC's website at www.arc-aflc.org.

SIDExSIDE

(Grades 7-12)
February 1-3
Cost: \$90/each

Sno Daze

(Grades 4-7)
February 1-3
Cost: \$90/each

Couples' Retreat

February 15-16 (17)*
Cost: \$125/couple

Women's Retreat

March 28-30
Cost: \$80/each

Men's Retreat

April 18-19 (20)*
Cost: \$65/each

'Fire Up'

Youth Camp

(Grades 4-7)
June 22-27
Cost: \$185/each

Kids' Camp

(Grades 1-3)
June 27-29
Cost: \$75/each

Family Camp

July 20-26
Family max: \$465-585

Classics' Retreat

(55+)
Sept. 19-21
Cost: \$75/each,
\$125/couple
*Option of extra night
w/breakfast

Noted missionary, author dies

Ingrid Trobisch Youngdale, Springfield, Mo., died Sept. 23 after a battle with pancreatic cancer. Daughter of missionaries Ralph and Gertrude Hult, she served as a missionary in Cameroon with her husband, Walter Trobisch, noted author and speaker on marriage and family. She was the author of several books, including *On Our Way Rejoicing*, *Hidden Strength*, *Learning to Walk Alone*, and *On My Way Home*.

Among her survivors are five children; her husband of nearly seven years, Pastor Lauren Youngdale; one sister, Eunice Will, Springfield, Mo.; and one brother, Gus Hult, Republic, Mich.

Southern congregations welcome visitors

Are you planning a trip to a warmer climate this winter? AFLC Home Missions Director Pastor Paul Nash is inviting snobirds and those seeking a winter getaway to visit the AFLC's southern congregations as an opportunity to encourage these fellowships.

Two of those congregations are Cornerstone Christian Church, Brandon, Fla., served by Pastor Brian Pearson, and Calvary Free Lutheran, Mesa, Ariz., served by Pastor Al Monson. For more information, call Home Missions at (763) 545-5631.

Missionary story illustrators sought

Ambassador Publications plans to publish a collection of mission stories in the spring of 2008 and would like to include several illustrations by children in this book. Interested individuals 18 years old and younger are invited to submit a sample drawing for consideration. Based on the submissions received, individuals will be selected to create one or more drawings to be published in the mission story book. Please send sample drawings along with name and age of artist to Ambassador Publications, 3110 East Medicine Lake Boulevard, Minneapolis, MN, 55441, by Jan. 1, 2008.

AFLC BENEVOLENCES Jan. 1- Oct. 31, 2007

FUND	TOTAL (Subsidy)	REC'D IN OCTOBER	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	% TOTAL
General Fund	\$361,225	\$32,490	\$319,284	88
Youth Ministries	73,114	7,048	56,885	78
Evangelism	108,236	8,429	94,695	87
Parish Education	107,052	15,166	82,212	77
Seminary	216,097	17,377	173,926	80
Bible School	343,545	34,038	296,766	86
Home Missions	316,413	39,509	254,029	80
World Missions	287,808	28,267	204,005	71
Personal Support	407,198	48,609	410,837	101
TOTALS	\$2,220,688	\$230,933	\$1,892,644	85
TOTALS 2006	\$1,994,798	\$172,917	\$1,674,573	84

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.

The WORD

I du. That's text messaging lingo for, "I don't understand." I'm afraid I just don't understand why so many are so into text messaging.

Text messaging, or tm, is when a person uses the buttons on their cell phone to send somebody a message that shows up on the screen of their phone. It's handy if you're in a situation where you can't talk or have a phone ring. It's not so handy to type out a long message using the buttons on the phone.



Pastor Craig Johnson

To make it easier to get a message across, a lingo has developed. When you're unsure of something you can just type Idk (I don't know). Close friends tell each other they're bff (best friends forever). To say goodbye you can type ttyl (talk to you later).

The abbreviations cut down on how many buttons you have to hit, but the trouble is you have to know the lingo. A young person sent me an e-mail and in it said, "lol." I had to ask for a translation: laugh out loud.

I like words. When they are English words I usually know what they mean. If I'm unsure of the meaning I can look it up in a dictionary. Of course, that doesn't bring as much amusement to a teenager as it does when I ask for a text message translation.

There's nothing wrong or unbiblical about text messaging or using abbreviations. A person wonders, though, if this is symbolic of a culture that has become too busy. Are we so busy we can't say the whole word and we have to use an abbreviation?

Jesus is described in the beginning of the Gospel of John as the Word. He was with God and He was God (John 1:1, NIV). He "became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (v. 14). He is the One who makes God known (v. 18). This is how God has chosen to let us know of His love and grace, His plan and His nature: through Jesus, the Word.

God did not send an abbreviated message. The Bible

says, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9). He is totally divine and totally human. He offers a complete salvation.

We send a text message (text, for short) with a few abbreviations and we think we have communicated. God does things differently. He didn't send a text to say, "I love you." He gave His Son. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

God does things differently. He didn't
send a text to say, "I love you."
He gave His Son.

The Lord moved into our neighborhood. He took up residence in this world. He gave us the opportunity to see how God interacts with people, deals with temptations, handles difficulties. He demonstrated love and grace in the way He lived and then gave his life as payment for our sins. God gave us the Word, full of grace and truth, so that we can have life that is full (John 10:10).

We have many different forms of communication available to us in our modern age. But there is still nothing as powerful as communicating with somebody face-to-face. That is the form of communication God has chosen. It takes more time than sending a text. But it is unmatched in its clarity and power.

The Lord wanted His declaration of love and His plan of salvation to be understandable to those who believe. He wanted to get the point across so that it would impact lives. So He gave the Word.

Author and musician Michael Card wrote: "When the Father's Wisdom wanted to communicate His love, He spoke it in one final perfect Word. He spoke the Incarnation and then so was born the Son. His final word was Jesus, He needed no other one."

God bless you as we celebrate the coming of the Word.

something to share

BY SANDY WEAVER

Are you **READY?**

I love the holiday season. But, like most of you, I always get too busy and spend too much time burning the candle at both ends to relax and enjoy the true spirit of Christmas. I've noticed that we Christians are quick to say that Jesus comes first in our lives. But if that's truly the case, how has Christmas come to be what it is today? I have a strong feeling that we have not stood our ground firmly enough when it comes to using this holiday time to honor and worship our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

I've decided to start a new trend this year, and I don't expect it to be easy. I know this will take more discipline than I usually force upon myself, but I am determined. Using the words "Prepare for Christmas" I've drawn up a plan of action and invite the rest of you to join me. I'm convinced peace and joy will replace the hustle and bustle that ends in fatigue and weariness.

PREPARE

- Ponder the reason I celebrate Christmas, asking for peace and joy for the season.
- Read God's Word everyday, including Scripture about Jesus' birth and life.
- Evaluate my spiritual condition, making sure I am listening to the Holy Spirit for insight.
- Pray for forgiveness, ask God to search my heart and reveal forgotten and unknown sins.
- Allow time for private and corporate meditation and worship.
- Rule out all activities that are not God's will for my life

by being in constant prayer.

Exercise at least three times a week to ensure good health and energy for the holiday season.

FOR

Find creative ways to bless others without overextending my schedule or overspending.

Oh yes! When God says no, I will say no, regardless of the plea.

Remember to shop and wrap gifts early, eliminating last-minute hassles.

CHRISTMAS

Conscientiously avoid being pulled into the materialism.

Help others in need as the Spirit leads.

Respond to cards and letters by praying for each person/family as they arrive.

Invite and entertain with less fuss, leaving more time to enjoy guests. Simplify.

Schedule realistically. Keep to-do list short, eliminating things with no spiritual value.

Take time to rest if needed and make an effort to get eight hours of sleep nightly.

Meet each morning with new anticipation of what God has for me that day.

Accept each day as God designs it.

Stay focused on Jesus, praising Him in all situations.

*Weaver is a member of Zoar Free Lutheran,
Hampton, N.D.,*