

THE LUTHERAN 
AMBASSADOR

DECEMBER 2009

CHRISTMAS

stories



Do it

BY SUSAN WHITEHEAD



anyway

Do it anyway," my mother said, cutting off my passionate debate of her unfair request. Eventually I graduated from rebelling against my mother to rebelling against God, whom I perceived as exactly echoing my mother's three words. Or perhaps it was the other way around. My defense on both fronts floated like oil to the surface as my personal mantra: "But what about me?"

Recently my neighbor handed me a book called, "Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments," by Kent Keith, who writes, "A paradox is an idea that is contrary to popular opinion, something that seems to contradict common sense and yet is true." Keith formulated his 10 paradoxical commandments for successful leadership when he was just 19:

- People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. *Love them anyway.*
- If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. *Do good anyway.*
- If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. *Succeed anyway.*
- The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. *Do good anyway.*
- Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. *Be honest and frank anyway.*
- The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. *Think big anyway.*
- People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. *Fight for a few underdogs anyway.*

- What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. *Build anyway.*
- People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. *Help people anyway.*
- Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. *Give the world the best you have anyway.*

When I strived mightily for personal control, those paradoxes were hopelessly beyond me and made no sense whatsoever. Why should I intentionally go out of my way to helpfully engage with people just like me? I mean, *why bother?*

God had long ago planned an answer. At the perfect time He arranged for my painful worldly defeat, a period of hopeless and helpless submission, and a spiritual rebirth containing an ever-growing portion of God's mind, heart, hope, eyes, ears, and hands.

My new equipment reveals that the abundant living that Jesus longs for us to experience is reflected, at least in part, in these paradoxical commandments. They were drawn from His life and make perfect sense. They are eminently doable, and He draws us to them as challenging adventures. In fact, we have absolutely nothing to lose, and any gain isn't up to us nor for us.

This month we are entering an extravagantly paradoxical season. It holds a Lenten time of dying to self, an Advent preparation bathed in hope with the renewing birth of Jesus, a baptism of consecration to be set apart *from* the world for service *in* the world, and a Pentecostal empowering to bring the paradoxical light of Jesus into this dark world by doing it anyway.

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The King of kings is drawing near;
The Savior of the world is here.
—“Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates”
Ambassador Hymnal No. 1

[Rejoice then, ye sad hearted, who sit in deepest gloom,
Who mourn o’er joys departed and tremble at your doom,
He who alone can cheer you is standing at the door;
He brings his pity near you, and bids you weep no more.
—“O How Shall I Receive Thee”
Ambassador Hymnal No. 3]

He undertakes a great exchange,
puts on our human frame,
And in return gives us His realm,
His glory, and His name.
—“Let All Together Praise Our God”
Ambassador Hymnal No. 46

How glad I am each Christmas Eve!
His praises then I sing;
He opens then for ev’ry child
the palace of the King.
—“I Am So Glad Each Christmas Eve”
Ambassador Hymnal No. 28



SOMETHING

TO LOVE

BY RACHEL SCHIERKOLK

His name was Freddy, and if there existed a more hyperactive, pot-bellied bundle of giggling mischief, my family had yet to hear of him. When he wasn't slurping cups of sugar flavored with a little coffee or cramming cookies into his mouth, you could find him trying to play with some of the smaller kids at church—usually knocking them down in the attempt. It wasn't that he was a malicious boy, but his over-the-top behavior made him the lovably unlovable sort.

Every year when Christmas time rolled around, it was the same. Freddy would come bounding into the Sunday school room, stay long enough to hear about the pageant and beg for a part before bounding out again. The fact that he never stayed for practice was a good reason for keeping him among the spectators on Christmas Eve rather than participating with the rest of the kids. But then came the year that Freddy decided to stay.

It was like a scene from *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. My mother asked every single boy she possibly could if they would like to be Joseph, but most of them had been Joseph last year or the year before and were adamant about not doing it again. Guess who had the only hand up? Freddy was wriggling in his seat shouting, "Pick me! Pick me! I want to be Joseph! Please, please, please, can I be Joseph?"

The absence of volunteers didn't leave my mother much choice. So Freddy was told that he could be Joseph as long as he made it to practice every Sunday and got through rehearsal without goofing around too much. He was ecstatic. We were less so.

Christmas Eve came and though we didn't exactly expect a catastrophe, neither did we anticipate a stellar performance. With Freddy one never knew quite what to expect.

The costume room was chaotic with bustling grownups pinning up the sagging

robes of kids who had gotten tired of sitting and decided to play tag instead. Joseph's headpiece had to be adjusted at least five times before the *posada* began, but eventually they were all on stage tucked in, pinned up, and mostly ready to go. We held our breath.

There comes a moment in each of our lives when we are forced to realize beyond a doubt that we have been absolutely and completely wrong about someone. This was one of those moments. Freddy played his part brilliantly. During the funny scenes he acted with unabashed gusto, and for the serious parts his face was the very picture of concern. Everyone said afterward that he could not have done a better job.

Isn't it funny how often we fail to appreciate people? "God loves everyone" has become a cliché to most of us—it has practically turned the word cliché into a cliché. Yet look at the ridiculous little ways that we forget about it. Would we ever say that Jesus didn't actually come down to this earth for everyone, but rather for a select few that He loved best? Of course not. But then, how is it that we manage to excuse our behavior toward those we find unlovable? I'm not just talking about those the Bible refers to as our "enemies." I'm talking about the Mrs. Smith from church who takes up a good 45 minutes of your time every Sunday babbling about her cats. I'm talking about the people we never take the time to get to know

because what we do know of them just plain irritates us.

What would happen if we made an effort to look for the good qualities in them rather than focusing on the ones that we can't stand? A friend of mine once said that everyone has something to bring to the table. Everyone. Understanding that is what it means to see someone through Jesus' eyes. It means looking beyond the irritating quirks and making an effort to figure out what God loves about them. What are the aspects of their personality that make Him smile? For instance, that rambunctious, hard-to-be-around kid I've been telling you about is the same boy who sits with my dad almost every Sunday evening for more than an hour and prays for me, my family and the church.

God did not have to come to this earth. He did not have to be born in a stable to the very beings He created in order that He might die for them. He didn't have to choose such a difficult path for Himself. But He *wanted* to. Therein lies the magic of Christmas—God coming down as a baby to grow up and endure the aches and pains of humanity because He saw in us something to love. We who are wretched, unlovable products of sin have a God in heaven who looks down at us and smiles. What if this Christmas we made an effort to reflect that smile to someone we consider unlovable? After all, that child in a manger was God smiling at us.

Schierkolk lives in Jerez, Mexico, where her parents, Pastor Todd and Barb Schierkolk, serve as AFLC missionaries

anticipation & Preparation

BY CLARA GUNDERSON

Closing her eyes the better to savor the last mouthful, Emily said, "Oh, Grandma! That was soooo yummy! I could eat your ice cream cake everyday!"

"Me, too, dear," Grandma answered. "But I like to save it for very special occasions. Shall we have it when you come for Christmas?"

"Christmas!" exclaimed Nate, taking his last bite. "That's a long way off."

"Yes," Grandma answered, "but we have to start planning now. Why, I've already bought several gifts and I've started planning about the cards we'll send. You know that *anticipation* for something is almost as important as the event. When I was a little girl I always dreamed of the things I would get, but now I love to plan the gifts I will give, gifts that will make someone's heart happy."

"Did you always have lots of presents under the tree, Grandma?" asked little Gracie.

Grandma took a long moment to answer. "No, not always," she responded.

Sensing a story, Emily asked, "What was it like when you were a little girl?"

"Well," Grandma answered, "Once upon a time there were five little girls ..."

That's as far as she got before Nate interrupted. "We know you are talking about you and your sisters."

"Of course," said Grandma. "Those are always my best stories."

"Creeping out of bed while it was still dark, the girls couldn't contain their excitement as they stopped at the living room doorway."

"Janie, you wake up Paulie and Suzie," whispered Dorothy.

"As the eldest, Dorothy took charge, plugging in the Christmas tree lights and at the same time sending Jan to the window to check on the big house on 12th Avenue."

"Are their lights on yet?" she asked.

"Unbeknownst to their neighbors, the

Bouchard girls competed each year to see who would be up first on Christmas morning.

"No!" Jan whispered loudly. "We beat them!"

"Just then Janie returned with the two youngest in tow. In expectation the girls turned to the beautiful tree and sought out the gifts that had been placed there for each of them."

"But the anticipation and preparation for this moment had begun much earlier, of course. The first snowfall always came early in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. With the first flakes the scene was set for wonderful ice skating on the ice pond their Dad had flooded, building snowmen and snow forts, and having snowball fights."

"Why even before Thanksgiving Mrs. Alexander, the Sunday school superintendent began planning the Christmas pageant, reading the story of the baby Jesus over and over so that the children would be familiar with it."

"How Janie and her sisters loved that story! How eager they were to be in the program, to sing the carols, to say their pieces, and yes, to wear the special dresses Mom had made. The program was always a candlelight service on Christmas Eve. When it ended, paper bags of treats were given out. And then home! To trim the tree, drink hot cocoa, and then away to bed with dreams of sugar cookies, shepherds, angels, and a baby held in His mother's arms."

As Grandma finished the story, you could tell that the children had been listening closely. Now Nate said wistfully, "Sure wish I'd been there."

Emily, however, remembering that Grandma had said that not all Christmases had been plentiful, turned to her grandma, "Tell us about a time when everything wasn't so good."

"Well, it wasn't that it was such a bad time," Grandma continued, "only that there wasn't time for planning and get-

ting excited because just four days before Christmas our family moved 500 miles away, to Minneapolis. So our preparations were for moving, packing suitcases, and taking the overnight train ride to the big city. My dad, your great-grandpa Ted, met us at the depot and took us to a nearby restaurant for breakfast and then out to south Minneapolis to our new home. I don't remember having a tree that year. The day before Christmas Eve, Dad took us all to Sears and Roebuck—the biggest store we had ever seen! He gave us girls each one dollar to buy what we wanted. It was our Christmas present that year. I remember being happy and walking by moonlight in the snow to Christmas Eve candlelight service at the church that was to be 'mine' for many, many years."

"So now, my dear children, I have one more short story to tell you. It's about how I came to realize the anticipation and joy of giving and the fun of planning a special gift to my parents. It was my first year out of high school. I had my first job and my own money to spend. While waiting for the city bus to take me home after work, I saw in a store window a beautiful set of silverware. I knew it was what I wanted to give Mom and Dad. So I had the store 'lay it away' for me, and each payday I went in and paid a little on it. What anticipation! What joy for me to have them unwrap it that Christmas morning!"

"But, think of the joy God must have had as His plan to send Jesus as our Savior unfolded that first Christmas! His preparations complete, the greatest gift of all is ours, forever!"

When Grandma said good-night to the children, she found them huddled in a circle, whispering. What were they planning? In anticipation her heart rejoiced that they understood the meaning of her story.

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







THE OLD STORY

BY PASTOR DALE LANKFORD

Every night my son asks me to tell him a story, and every night I am challenged to make up one that is entertaining. Sometimes they flop. Usually they are enough to satisfy him. Occasionally a story comes together that is really good. It captures his attention and my older son's attention in the bunk bed above us. And the story will stick with me awhile and cause me to think it over a little more.

There are stories all around us. We hear them all the time. Some capture our curiosity but are quickly left behind. Others aren't worth the time it takes to listen to them. But occasionally we hear a story that stays with us. Unfortunately, the best of stories often fall on uninterested ears.

So it is with the Nativity story. For many years my ears were deaf to this story. At times I didn't care to hear it, and at other times there were other stories that I found far more important. I felt that other stories warranted my attention more than the Nativity story from the Bible. Even when people told me it was a true story, it changed little in my mind. It didn't really matter whether it was true or not. What mattered more was that, from my perspective, it lacked any relevance. It was 2,000 years ago, it was about a baby in a manger, and I didn't think a Savior was necessary.

Then I heard the story again, but this

time it was different. I was older, I was looking at life differently, and I had been considering my life ahead and my own mortality. This time I was at a Christmas concert at a church in my community when I heard the Nativity story told and sung beautifully. I heard that God had come to earth as a baby so that I might live. I heard that my soul was going to spend eternity somewhere and that only through believing in this child as the One whom God has sent could I spend eternity in heaven. God had made sure that I heard this story as many times as would be necessary. This time, in that church, it did not fall on deaf ears. It was important to me, it had relevance, and it impacted my heart to the point that I believed.

Stories can be very powerful. Even when a story is a work of fiction it can provide thoughtful insight into something in our lives that has been a major point of concern, worry or fear. At times, stories can put thoughts and feelings we may have into words that we could have never come up with on our own. They can move us to action, inspire us to share, and cause us to reflect upon and change the way we live. When God gets behind a story, He takes it to a whole new level. In the Nativity story, God saw that a message needed to be communicated to mankind. He initiated and accomplished the historic event. He ensured that there were witnesses. He moved people

to immediately share what they had seen, and inspired others to write it down so that it could continue to be told forever. God's Nativity story does all of the things that a powerful story should. It moves to action, inspires to share, and causes reflection and change in people's lives. But it also does things other stories cannot. It is living and active. It is able to bring conviction and repentance to the heart of the hearer. And it is able to bring salvation and eternal life to those who believe.

The Nativity story did that for me. That one Christmas, when my ears and heart were open to the story I had heard so many times, made all the difference. God continues to use the story year after year as I continue to hear it and share it with others. In one year, the humble environment that the King of kings was born into has particular impact. In another, the phrase "born for you" grows in its relevance. It is a story that I never tire of hearing.

As you hear and share the Nativity story this Christmas season, know that this may be the year that it has special relevance and impact for you or someone you know. And if your child needs a bedtime story, turn to the Bible and give the Nativity story a try.

Lankford serves Lord of Life Lutheran, Mount Vernon, Wash.



TWICE



GIFT

BY SARAH NELSON

Two years ago our family was eagerly awaiting the arrival of our Korean-born son, Micah Jung Woo, into our hearts and home. We had been showered with gifts of clothing, toys, and words of encouragement as we prepared for his homecoming. God had blessed us with several grants to help cut down the high costs involved with adoption. As always, this, too, was a journey of faith as we watched and waited to see how and when God would provide. Little could I imagine the Christmas gift that would later serve as a reminder of His faithfulness and provision.

My husband, Dave, and I evaluated our possessions. What did we have of any possible monetary worth that we could sell to help increase our adoption fund? Going through our belongings, we quickly sorted out what was necessary from what was unnecessary to daily living. The “to sell” pile included books, a set of china, and my small collection of pink Depression glass. The sale of these items was an easy decision to make in view of the dollars they could bring to get us closer to our goal of bringing Micah home.

As I was packing up items to bring to a local eBay trader, my dear friend Denise Gray stopped by for a visit.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

I told her what we were up to. While she understood, I could tell she was sad that

we were saying good-bye to items that she knew had brought us joy.

Dave and I were happy when the items we had listed with the eBay trader were purchased for decent prices. Who would read Dave’s books? Who would serve Christmas dinner on my former china? Fleeting thoughts, but ones I enjoyed thinking about.

A few weeks later, just before Christmas, I heard the doorbell ring. Embarrassed that I was still in my robe at 9 a.m., I had the children answer the door.

“It’s okay Mom, it’s just the Grays!” they announced.

Denise and I are dear friends, but we rarely saw each other before noon due to school schedules. I could tell by the hour on the clock and the look on their faces that something special was in the air.

“We just wanted to drop by with your Christmas gifts,” said Denise.

Her family had brought over a plate of their famed scrumptious chocolate truffles. What more could I have hoped for? They knew how I enjoyed this sweet treat.

Soon Denise said, “Sarah there’s more!”

She handed me a box. I could feel her excitement as she not so patiently waited for me to rip the gift package open. Inside of the box was my favorite piece of Depression glass, my pink cake plate—the very one that had just been sold on eBay.

“Denise!” was all I could say as I hugged

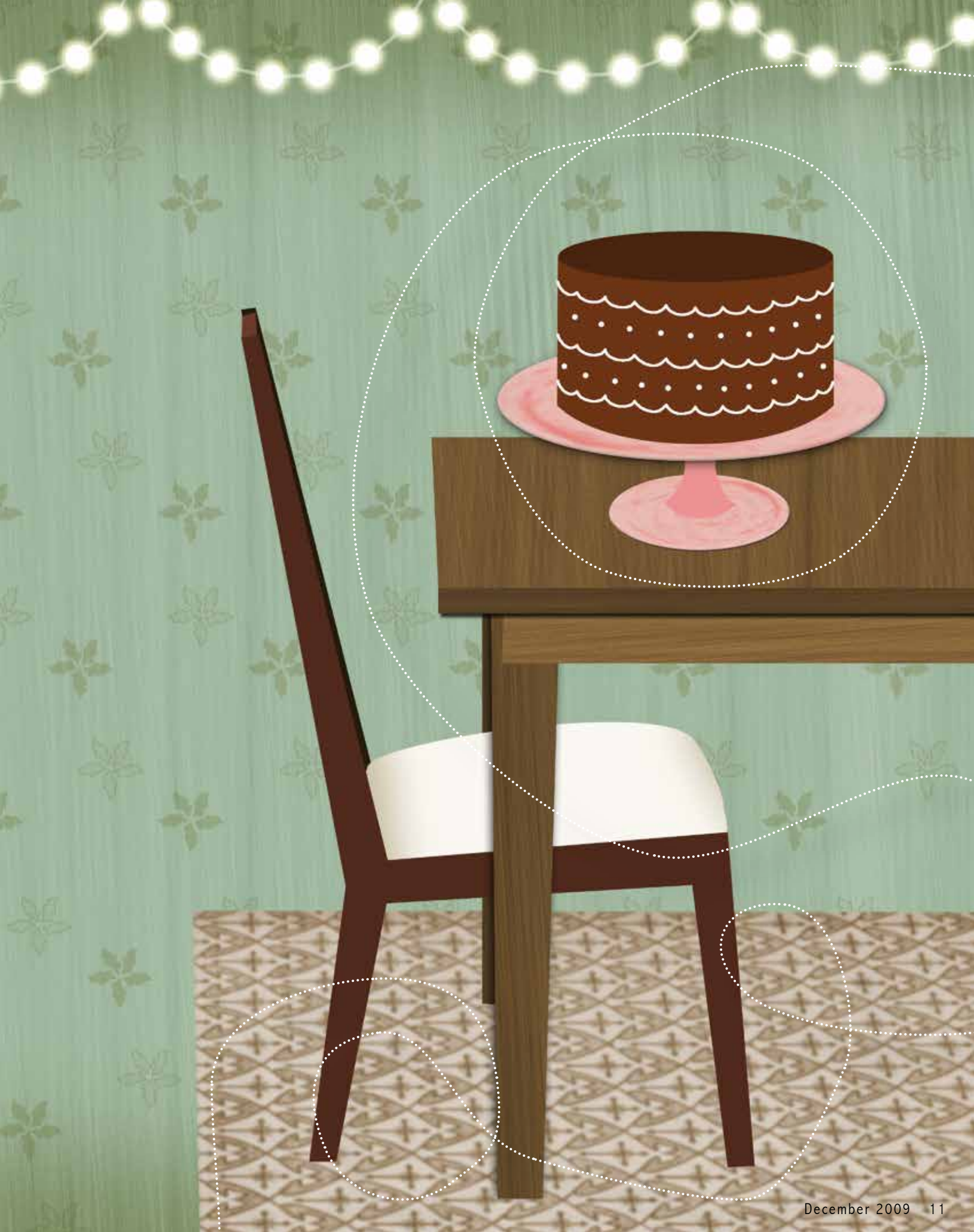
her and cried. This present she had given me was a double gift.

The funds she used to purchase it helped bring my son home just a few months later. And the cake plate ... it sits beautifully in my dining room once again, reminding me of the gift of friendship I share with Denise. Knowing she loved me enough to take the time and effort to surprise me in such a creative and meaningful manner warms my heart.

The plate is something I know will remain in our home. When I use it, it not only reminds me of Denise, but even more so, of my heavenly Father who gave the greatest gift. Because He sent Jesus to earth to ultimately die for my sins and rise again for my blessed assurance, I can have fellowship with others who call Him Father. He knew and knows the deepest longings and hopes of my heart, and with this knowledge has provided me with all that I need.

The journey of faith God called us to in adopting our youngest son has been marked with moments where we haven’t been able to see how all the pieces would fall into place. The gift of a plate and friendship are small but beloved reminders to me of His great love and care.

Nelson is a member of Redeemer Free Lutheran, Ontonagon, Mich., where her husband, Pastor David Nelson, serves.





are you ready? With all the planning, preparation, presents and plays, the four weeks leading up to Christmas can be very hectic. But what is the real meaning of Advent?

Advent, according to Webster's Dictionary, means "the coming into being; the coming of Christ at the Incarnation." Incarnation—there's another "churchy" word young people have difficulty understanding. John 1:14 reads: "The Word [God] became flesh and lived awhile among us." That's what incarnation means: God becoming flesh. Jesus, who was with God the Father from days of eternity, and was Himself God the Son, took on a human body. So Advent is the coming of Christ to the earth as a man; His first coming.

However, Advent is much more! Webster additionally says, "the second coming." Advent is to be used to draw attention to Jesus' second coming. It is not only a time of preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, it is also a time to prepare for His return. Jesus, after His death, burial, resurrection and ascension into heaven, will return. He will come again at the end of the age.

"After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven'" (Acts 1:9-11).

The second coming of Christ can be a frightening prospect for some who only focus on the tribulation, and not on the hopeful, life-affirming promises that are also associated with Jesus' return to earth. Maybe this is why the second coming is often less emphasized during Advent.

Should we witness Jesus' return, what should we look forward to? For one thing, "we will all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye" (I Corinthians 15:50-52). That is pretty fast! But how will we be changed? What will this look like?

The Apostle John tells us in I John 3:2-3 that when Jesus appears, "we shall be like Him." What were some of the attributes Jesus displayed after His resurrection? We know He could be touched. He could eat. He had physical substance, just as we do. As Jesus said, "a spirit does not have flesh and

bone as you see I have" (Luke 24:39).

Even though Jesus had a physical body after His resurrection, He could move through physical objects, such as doors. "Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'" (John 28:26). When Jesus appears, our bodies will be just like His—able to do miraculous things because "we shall be like Him."

That is not all. Jesus speaks in Matthew 19:28 about a coming time known as "the renewal [regeneration] of all things." What is going to be renewed? "... the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay" (Romans 8:21). That takes in all life forms, plant and animal. Therefore, there will be a regeneration of all creation. Isaiah gives us a glimpse into what that will look like: "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. ... They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:6-9).

The book of Revelation also contributes to the vision of what things will be like. "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). Much of this description is currently how we think of heaven when we die, and yet there will be no death then. This is how it will be for believing Christians when Jesus returns to renew and make new the heavens and the earth.

The King of kings and Lord of lords is coming back! What unspeakable joy that will bring to those who eagerly await this event. The Apostle Paul, when speaking to the Thessalonians on this topic, instructed them to "encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing" (I Thessalonians 5:11).

No matter what you are facing this Christmas, be it fun times, or difficult times, take time to ponder the hope that Advent still brings. The best present is yet to come, God's eternal Gift to us: our King and Savior, Jesus Christ, our Messiah, "Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8).

Advent: are you ready?

Hildreth is a member of St. John's Lutheran, Newark, Ohio.

are
you
ready?



OUTSIDE STORM, BUT **Peace** WITHIN

BY ALF SKARBØVIK

You better open the throttle more!" The first mate himself has come into the engine room with the order. He stands leaning on the ladder to call down to me. The water has seeped in from the southwest into the oil-skin suit. The first mate is busy and must go up again, but I call to him to come down for a few minutes. I have to have all my attention riveted on the machinery and throttle valve, which I can't ignore for a moment.

The first mate stomps all the way down to the floor in his sea boots, lights a cigarette and with one hand on my shoulder tells me how things look up on the deck.

"The starboard lifeboat has been smashed to kindling wood by the heavy sea. A couple of sailors work in the galley to patch the door, which has been broken to pieces. We can barely steer the ship and hold it into the sea, which continually seeps over it. But we press on toward the coast of Spain. Up on the captain's bridge a man has already caught a glimpse of light from two lighthouses. We must force the engine up several revolutions so that we can come

clear of the dangerous coast."

Suddenly the ship takes a frightening lurch, the engine races and oil and grease are thrown onto the floor. I wipe it up, lowering the throttle valve, and then we hear a heavy sea thundering, crashing over the deck. Then we hear the tramping of many sea boots, calls and commands. The first mate is already on the deck again. I heard him mumble something about grease when he began to climb the ladder.

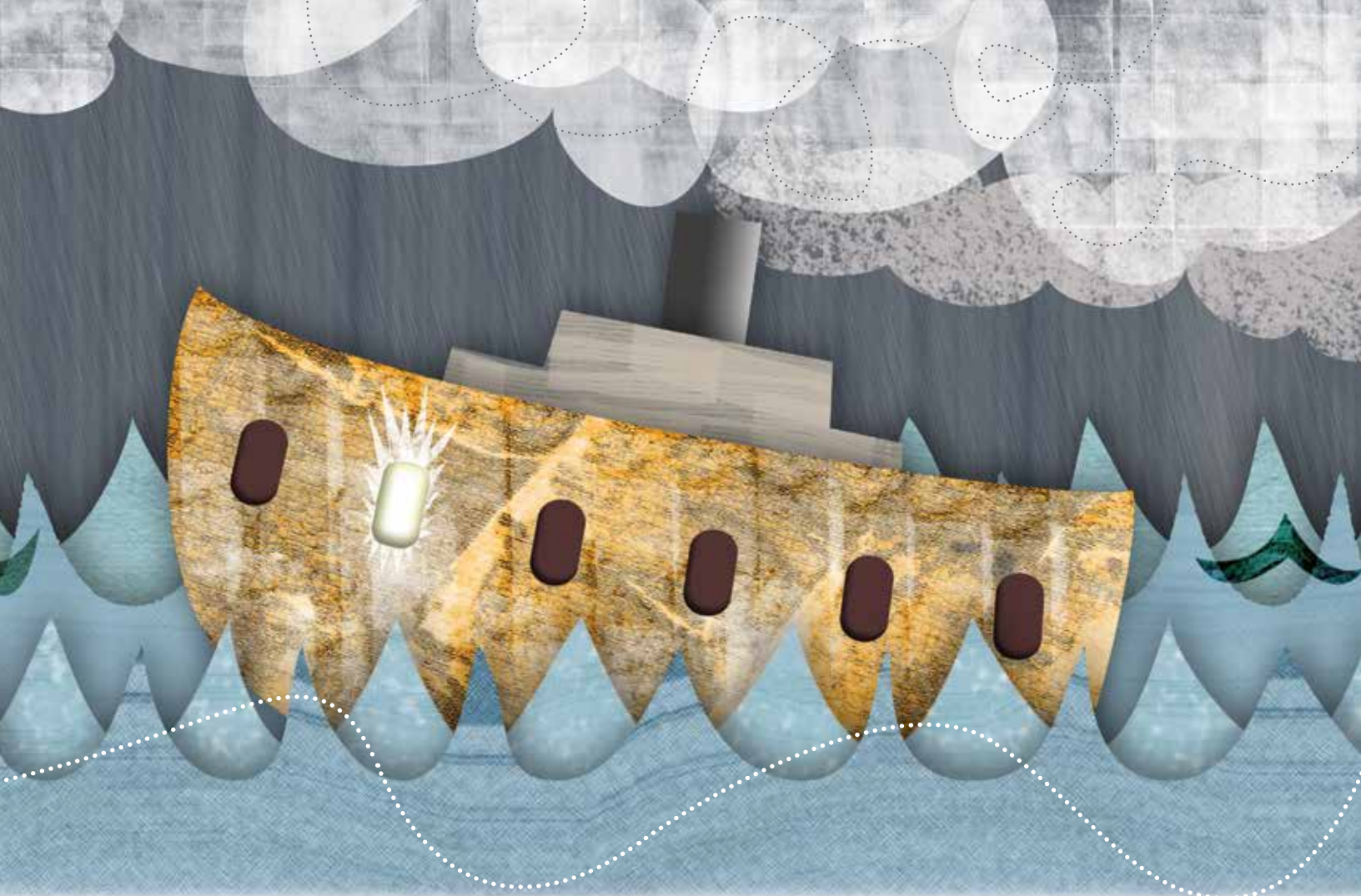
"Open the throttle," he said.

It's not an easy thing to do when every time the sea lifts the propeller in the air the engine races like it would tear itself loose from its mooring. He knew that well enough, the first mate, that's why he came himself. But now we have to have more speed and I am told to open the main valve a little. The hours go by with steady and uninterrupted use of the throttle valve—closed and open—according to how the ship reacts in the sea. Now and then a sharply ice-cold bath of salt water comes down through the air pipes and makes me gasp for air, warm and sweaty as I am.

It is the third day in this storm and tonight is Christmas Eve. It can scarcely be any kind of normal Christmas Eve. The galley, full of water, is a mess; we are glad that the cook has been able to make coffee in such weather. We will have to wait to celebrate Christmas until we come to port, the captain has said. Oh yes, we are well resigned to that.

At last we are off duty. A carafe of coffee and big slices of bread are in the mess room, along with some Christmas cake the cook had baked before the stormy weather broke out in all seriousness. I sit alone in my berth. I will need to do what I can to get a few hours of sleep before I have to go down to the engine room again. But it is Christmas Eve!

A strange feeling comes over me as my thoughts drift toward home to Mother and Father and the Christmas festivities there. I see the Christmas tree decorated with cotton wool streamers, flags and lights. I can smell the delicious odors from the kitchen and see Mother going around and putting the finishing touches on things.



I suddenly remember that I have some candles lying somewhere. I bring them out and secure three of them to a shelf. They are all soon burning clearly, so I turn off the electric light. A festive feeling pervades the berth. I shall read the Christmas gospel before I go to bed. I straighten myself on the bench, brace myself with one foot on the edge of the bed so that I won't roll off, find the New Testament and read: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went a decree from Caesar Augustus ..."

There is a loud knock on the door and before I know what is happening the third mate comes in. He looks at the lights on the shelf, at the New Testament and me, smiles a big, puzzled smile and says, "Ah, so ... yes, I thought it would be something like this. I couldn't get to bed at once, you know. Come over to my place then. You can bring the book with you."

I bring the Testament and hurry over to the third mate's cabin. There is a Christmas tree on the eating shelf. Not a real one, but a miniature one which is customarily placed at Christmas time. It has tiny little

lights on it. The third mate has a cherished wife at home, who had been especially early with a Christmas package to her loved one. The third mate received it when we lay in Sweden, while the rest of us have to wait until we come to Spain for our packages. She had put the little Christmas tree in the package. It had been pressed flat and rumped, but now it had been fixed and looked its finest.

We light the small lights, sit quietly and gaze at our little Christmas tree. I begin to whistle the melody of a carol. We try one carol after the other, become less self-conscious before each other and suddenly we are both singing, "Thy little ones, dear Lord, are we."

Two more men come in, lured by the singing. Their faces light up when they see the Christmas tree, and they decide to join the singing. The third mate tells them that he interrupted me in the midst of reading the Christmas gospel, and so I must take out the New Testament again.

It becomes a festive time in the cabin. The small lights on the Christmas tree burn

still and clear. And the old message sounds forth as it once did to the shepherds out in the fields near Bethlehem. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

Outside the storm continues to rage as forcefully as before. The ship trembles and quivers with each wave that breaks over the deck. The bow quickly stands high in the air, quickly buries itself down in the trough of the water, rises again and sends cascading water to both sides. Ice-cold, the storm and the sea lash the faces of those who are on watch on the captain's bridge and deck. It is a battle for life, the ship and the cargo.

But in spite of the battle, storm and darkness, there is a quite, holy peace in our cabin.

From Sjømannsmisjon, 1956. Translated from Norwegian by Pastor Raynard Huglen, Newfolden, Minn.



BY PASTOR ALVIN GROTHE

It was going to be our first Christmas south of the equator. My family and I had been sent by God to be missionaries in Brazil. It might have seemed like we were alone, but we had Jesus' promise: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

This was to be a Christmas of contrasts. Take a farm boy and his family from the quiet country of northwestern Minnesota and plant them in a huge city of millions—Sao Paulo, Brazil—and you start out with a tremendous contrast. Instead of snowstorms and lots of fluffy, white snow, there was thunderstorms and hot weather. The quietness of the farm was replaced by the constant noise and busyness of the city. Instead of familiar faces at Sunday school and worship, everyone at the chapel in downtown Sao Paulo started out as strangers to us.

In those months and days leading up to Christmas, the Christian friends made at the chapel and at language school became a blessing and support to us. God has a way of providing for all our needs. He provided for the children, also. Close by was a Christian academy where several of our children attended and had Christian friends and teaching.

Christmas was drawing closer and our barrels with most of our belongings had not arrived yet. On the third trip that two other missionaries and myself made to the port of Santos to check on them, we found they had finally made it. Praise the Lord! After a few problems with customs, they released them for us to take home. Now we could

play our Christmas music. It was like an early Christmas for the children. They dived in and found their toys, games, books and clothes. It was exciting for all of us.

Around the city we saw and heard very little to remind us of Christmas. I cannot remember any Christmas lights or music like back home. The food also was a contrast. There were lots of piglets, head and all, for roasting. The street market had lots of other food, too, but no lutefisk for the Norwegians. Beans and rice were always in order.

We survived but we felt a twinge of loneliness and homesickness setting in. No snow, no cold, and no pine trees. Hot weather with thunder, lightning and heavy rain about 4 p.m. every afternoon was typical. No loved ones nearby. Can this actually be Christmas time? Yes! It is still Jesus' birthday, our Savior, Lord and King. That was something we couldn't forget but could hold on to wherever we were.

Eventually, as Christmas drew near, we did find a small tree. Not a pine and quite wimpy and droopy. I don't remember having any lights in a barrel nor did we have the little candleholders for the tree like in the old days. However, Christmas cards were coming from home and from our church people. They made beautiful decorations tucked in among the branches of our wimpy little tree. The cards were a blessing and reminder that we were celebrating with others around the world the same birthday, that of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Pictures of baby Jesus in the cradle. The angel announcing His birth. The shepherds

with their sheep hearing the wonderful news. The reminder that God's people back home were praying for us. And, by now, we had many wonderful Christian friends in Sao Paulo.

Christmas arrived. We were well, had a very comfortable home and bountiful food. God kept His promise: "And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). We had a wonderful meal on Christmas Eve and then gathered as a family around our little wimpy tree decorated with Christmas cards from home and with some home-made trimming. Some favorite carols were sung and then the reading of the Christmas story: "Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord'" (Luke 2:10-11). The Lord was very present with us.

Location, miles, culture, conditions or weather cannot and will not change the truth or the meaning of Christmas. Feelings will come and feelings will go, but truth must prevail. The Light of the world has come.

May Jesus be living in your home and your heart at Christmas and throughout the year, whatever your location may be.

Grothe, a retired AFLC pastor living in Astoria, Ore., served as an AFLC missionary for two years in Brazil.





HOW HE PROVIDES

BY BERNHARD NELSON

It was early in December 1949, and with Christmas coming and four kids, Mom (my wife) and I didn't have a nickel to our names. I got up in the morning and as usual did the milking. Then, after grabbing the ax and spade, I headed down to the river to chop a hole in the ice for the cattle to drink. I had to hurry so I could get the old Chevy started to bring Levon, Ronnie, Berna and Harold (our kids) to school.

When I got down to the river I noticed a trail of blood right across from where I was going to chop a hole in the ice. Being somewhat alert, I figured that this was quite unusual. I followed this trail to the base of an old box elder tree, where I found the rear end of a muskrat sticking out of a hallow. The muskrat didn't seem to be too peppy. When I tugged on his tail I heard the hissing of a mink coming from inside the tree. Just to show you how fast I can think, I took the spade and jammed it into the ground, right behind the muskrat's behind. The spade fit perfectly between two main roots of that box elder, so I knew I could leave it, bring the kids to school, and figure out what to do next.

As I was coming back from bringing the kids to school, I spotted the old lawnmower with the Briggs and Stratton motor. I figured it might start, and it did. Next, I found a length of steel flex hose, which happened to fit right over the exhaust pipe of the Briggs. My plan was to poison the mink in its tree hallow trap. I pushed, dragged, and carried that contraption down to the river, over to the old tree and, sure enough, friend muskrat was still there. I gave that tail another tug and the hiss from that disgusted mink came loud and clear.

I got that old flex pipe tucked in under the muskrat, which didn't seem to mind, and got the mower started. After chopping ice for a bit, the old Briggs stopped. This time when I pulled on friend muskrat's tail, there wasn't any protesting on the other end, so I slowly pulled the muskrat out. Fastened firmly in his head were the teeth of the big dark male mink, deader than a doornail. I slung them both over my shoulder and dragged the mower back up the hill.

Right then a fur buyer drove into the yard. To my knowledge, no fur buyer had come in the yard before, and none since.

He took a good look at the mink and

said, "Glad to see you didn't shoot him full of holes."

"No," I said, "I didn't shoot him."

Upon looking closer he said, "Looks like you didn't trap him either."

"No," I said, "I didn't trap him."

"Well then," he said, "how on earth did you get him?"

I told him, "I got him with the lawnmower."

He gave me \$36 for that No. 1 dark prime mink and \$2 for that muskrat.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Lord provided for our Christmas that year. With \$38, Mom and I went to town, got a tree, lutefisk, makings for *krub*, and had enough to get gifts for everyone. Levon tells me that Ronnie still has his red fire truck, with 1949 written on the bottom.

From that point on I never doubted that the Lord would provide for us.

Nelson is the father of Phyllis Peterson, a member of Valley Free Lutheran, Portland, N.D. The story was recorded by her brother, Levon Nelson, and took place on the family farm in Portland.



Listen & learn

“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.”

Romans 10:17

By Pastor Nate Jore

The goal of missions is that people will be converted to Jesus Christ. This is a conversion of the heart: repentance that leads to a godly life. People are converted as they hear the Word of God, repent and believe the gospel. The key lies in the hearing. Before people can truly respond to the gospel, they must first hear it. Much of missions is dedicated to enabling people of other cultures and languages to truly hear the Word of God in their own language.

In Uganda we have distributed more than 1,000 Bibles. The questions remain: Will the people be able to read the Bible, hear the message of salvation, and be saved? Are the people able to read? Is the language the Bible is translated into one that is easy for them to read and does it convey meaning to them? Do the people easily gain knowledge from reading or do they prefer another method of learning? These are some of the questions we have been asking.

In many parts of the world people prefer a hear-to-learn method rather than a read-to-learn method. The term “orality” has been used to describe this reliance on the spoken word, rather than the written word, to communicate. Many people groups in the world have passed on their culture, history, and religion through oral means such as stories, songs, and proverbs. Uganda certainly fits into this category. This does not mean that they are all illiterate, but that their preferred method of learning (i.e. what is most natural to them) is the oral method.

In working with the Ambassador Institute, we have developed a series of Bible stories that we are teaching in two classes. It is very exciting to see the stories transcend culture and speak to the people of Uganda. The stories reveal God’s character and teach doctrine. Jesus was an oral teacher. Mark 3:34 says, “He was never without a story when he taught them ...” For example, he taught the doctrine of justification as a story: “There were two men who

went up to the temple to pray” (Luke 18:9-14). At the end of the story, one man went home justified and the other did not.

Roy, my language helper in Uganda, has been helping me translate the stories into the local language. One day, as we were working on the story of the 12 spies (Numbers 13-14) Roy was puzzled.

“Is God really like this?” he asked.

Roy was referring to God’s punishment of the Israelite community for refusing to trust Him and enter the land of Canaan, resulting in 40 years of wandering in the desert.

“It sure seems like a very strict punishment,” he said.

Many in Uganda have only heard a partial gospel—God loves them and wants them to go to heaven. The story of the 12 spies had revealed to Roy a new aspect of God’s character: He is a punisher of sinners. That day I shared with Roy the reality of the Day of Judgment that lies ahead when all those who have refused to believe in Jesus will suffer the punishment of the wrath of God.

After reading Romans 2:5 and Revelation 16, Roy was a bit stunned and said, “I did not know this was in the Bible.”

Finally, I shared with Roy I Thessalonians 5:9, “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

As the reality of our salvation in Jesus from the wrath of God against sinners sunk in, Roy exclaimed, “Praise be to the name of the living God!”

Roy is one of many who have been impacted by hearing the stories of the Bible. Our goal in Uganda is to see the multiplication of local Bible trainers who will carry these stories to their communities.

Jore and his family are AFLC missionaries in Jinja, Uganda. They are currently on furlough in the United States.

Youth Ministries returns director to full-time status

Decision, effective Jan. 1, 2010, is dependent upon continued giving

With thanks to God's abundant provision, members of the AFLC Youth Ministries Board announce the return of Director Jason Holt to full-time status effective Jan. 1, 2010.



Pastor Jason Holt

One year ago the board addressed long-term financial insecurity by the only means left—reduction of the director's position to three-quarter time status. At the same time, the board implemented a long-range ministry plan designed to return the director to full-time as soon as possible. This ministry plan also provided adequate funding for their ministry of

helping AFLC congregations as they win youths to Jesus, build them up in God's Word, equip them to share Jesus with others, and multiply maturing teen disciples of Christ.

The decision to return to full-time status relies on continued strong giving in the years to come, including total receiving of \$110,000 in 2010. God multiplies this relatively small amount as AFLC Youth Ministries serves local congregations by:

- Assisting them in developing ministry to youth
- Helping them find trained youth leaders
- Organizing student mission opportunities
- Hosting an annual youth workers' retreat
- Sponsoring FLY Boot Camp for leadership training

AFLC Youth Ministries thanks God for His abundant provision and rejoices in the faithfulness of many individuals and congregations who have acted as conduits for God's blessing. For more information please visit www.aflc.org/youth.

Home Missions completes DVD film project

Video series seeks to train volunteers, churches in Parish Builder ministry

AFLC Home Missions completed filming Oct. 22-23 on part three of a soon-to-be-released Parish Builder training DVD. The film shoot in Camarillo, Calif., emphasized practical ideas for Parish Builder ministry, and the creative outreach modeled by the Parish Builder team at Good Shepherd Free Lutheran in Camarillo. Video was shot at three locations: a barn, a beach, and a baseball field. Working with Pastor Jim Johnson, sessions included "How Jesus Treated Children," "Paul's Just-Like-Family Ministry Approach," and "The Neighbors Down the Street."

This video series, combined with parts one (Biblical Foundations) and two (Field Interviews) filmed earlier in the year, provides a comprehensive overview for future Parish Builders and the leadership team of churches where Parish Builders will work. Those videos were shot at the AFLC campus in Plymouth, Minn., and during the



Pastor Jim Johnson (left) presents a session on "How Jesus Treated Children" during a filming in Camarillo, Calif., for the AFLC Home Missions Parish Builder training video series. Johnson serves Good Shepherd Free Lutheran, Camarillo, a Home Missions congregation. Also pictured are Pastor Paul Nash (center), Home Missions director, and Micah Horneman, videographer.

Free Lutheran Youth Convention in July at Estes Park, Colo.

Parish Builders are adults—single, married, or of retirement age—volunteering any amount of time assisting the pastor of a Home Missions congregation. They assist in areas like teaching, visitation, canvassing, working with youths, and special outreach events. They support the pastor

and his family and encourage the congregation members to become more vitally involved and assume leadership. Keep this cutting edge DVD project in your prayers as Home Missions seeks to more effectively equip more Parish Builders for ministry.

For more information on the Parish Builder program, contact AFLC Home Missions at (763) 545-5631.



Pastor Eric Swenson, a 2009 graduate of AFLTS, was ordained on Oct. 4 at St. Paul's Lutheran, Jewell, Iowa, with Pastor Elden Nelson, AFLC president, officiating. Swenson was installed at Christian Free Lutheran, Wheatland, Iowa, on Oct. 11.

Christmas concerts

The AFLC Schools will host a weekend of Christmas concerts on Dec. 12-13. On Saturday, Dec. 12, the schools will host a Christmas Food Sampler from 4-6 p.m., with the concert at 7 p.m.

The AFLC will host an open house from 2 to 3 p.m. on Sunday, Dec. 13, at the administrative building, with the concert scheduled for 3:30 p.m.

All events will take place on the AFLC Schools campus in Plymouth, Minn.

Order Christmas issue, yearly sub.

Are you searching for that perfect gift for someone this Christmas? Can't figure out what to get someone who has everything? How about a yearly subscription to the Lutheran Ambassador magazine? Filled with encouraging, educational and insightful articles, the *Lutheran Ambassador* is available now for just \$18/year.

The Christmas issue of the Lutheran Ambassador is also a perfect gift for families. This year's issue features personal stories from Christmas. This single issue is available for just \$2.

For more information about the AFLC's monthly publication, contact managing editor Ruth Gunderson at ruthg@aflc.org or call (763) 545-5631.

Student Missions plans 2010 trips

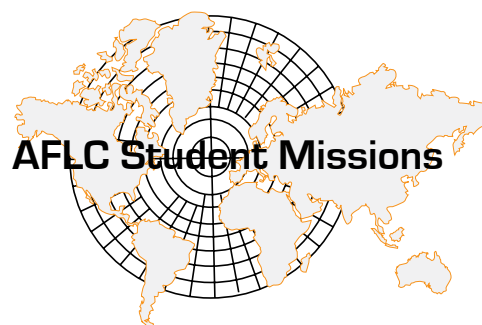
Register for trips to L'viv, Ukraine, and southeastern India

AFLC Student Missions is hosting two mission trips in 2010. A group of eight students will travel to L'viv, Ukraine, July 15-25 to work with Pastor Tomasz and Miriam Chmiel, AFLC missionaries on loan to East European Mission Network. A second group of eight students will travel to southeastern India July 29-Aug. 20 to work with Pastor Luther Dasari, a native Indian missionary working with AFLC-India. Additional training days are scheduled prior to the trips.

Both trips are currently open for registration by AFLC youths. Students must be at least 15 years old to travel to the Ukraine and at least 16 years old to travel to India. The application deadline for both trips is Feb. 1, 2010. Students will be asked to raise their own funding for the trips, including \$2,100 for Ukraine and \$2,600 for India.

AFLC Student Missions is a ministry under the direction of AFLC Youth Ministries. It partners closely with AFLC World Missions in an effort to plan, organize and lead mission trips for youths around the nation. All trips are planned to work alongside established missionaries. Students on the trips will serve God through work projects and relational ministry while learning from people who do it every day. Students are challenged to grow in their faith as they serve God.

"The whole trip really opened my eyes more to see how much of a need there



is for missionaries," said Josiah Nelson, who traveled to Brazil in 2008. "I would strongly recommend any Christian who is serious about God to go on a mission trip and see how God might open your eyes to missions."

Students are encouraged, once they return home, to share their experiences with their home congregations. The hope is that the sharing time will give people in home congregations an opportunity to experience and understand our missionaries and their work abroad, and encourage them to develop a deeper relationship with God and an openness to serving Him full time or supporting those who do.

To register for these trips and for more information, including a blog on the 2009 trip to Uganda, visit the Student Missions Web site at www.aflc.org/youth/events/student-missions. You may also contact Sam and Rachel Menge, student missions coordinators, at 612-599-5524 or e-mail student.missions@aflc.org.

Ministries offer user-friendly e-mail list

This summer, AFLC ministries added a new way for you to stay connected with department news and prayer requests. It is now easy to keep updated with the latest from AFLBS, Evangelism, Home Missions, Parish Education, etc. Not only will this centralized e-mail service provide a professional look to our communication, but this transition allows us to cut rising postage costs. In addition, you can now directly manage your own newsletter account, which means if you need to change your e-mail address or want to stop receiving certain updates, you can make the change yourself, at the click of a button. It takes only five minutes to sign up.

Here's how:

- Go to www.aflc.org
- On the top right, click on the "Sign up" tab
- On this page you will find a list of all the department updates that are currently being offered by e-mail. Simply fill out your information and put a check mark beside all the updates you would like to receive. Hit "submit" and you're finished.

Our Association looks forward to serving you through new resources, information, and encouragement. Keep us in your prayers. Share your ideas. Let's make use of every tool as we advance the Kingdom of God.

People and Places

Sam Wellumson, a 2009 graduate of AFLTS, has accepted a call to serve Christ the King Free Lutheran, East Grand Forks, Minn. Wellumson is originally from Williston, N.D.

Pastor Rick Larson was installed as pastor of Abiding Faith Free Lutheran, Ortonville, Minn., and Elim Lutheran, Clinton, Minn., on Nov. 8. Pastor Elden Nelson, AFLC president, officiated at the services.

Pastor Mark Johnson was ordained on Nov. 15 at Zion-Sarpsborg Lutheran, Dalton, Minn., during a joint parish service. Pastor Elden Nelson, AFLC president, officiated. Johnson, who completed his seminary training through the Summer Institute of Theology at AFLTS, serves the three-point parish of Kvam Free Lutheran, Zion-Sarpsborg Lutheran and Tordenskjold Free Lutheran.

Pastor Walter Beaman has retired from the ministry after 50 years serving as a youth or full-time pastor. Beaman and his wife, Ellen, now reside in East Grand Forks, Minn., where he is serving as an interim pastor at Christ the King Free Lutheran.

Members of **United Lutheran**, Laurel, Neb., celebrated the congregation's 50th anniversary on Nov. 1.

Jones was pastor, missionary

Pastor Gary Jones, 77, of Pleasanton, Texas, passed away Oct. 15 in Jourdanton, Texas.

He was born on July 9, 1932. He married Juanita on Aug. 6, 1955. She preceded him in death on Aug. 28, 2007. He was called to the Alaskan Mission Field in 1969, where they served four mission terms. They spent more than 35 years ministering to congregations in Illinois, Wisconsin, Arkansas, and Washington. His last call was to Good Shepherd Lutheran, Pleasanton.

Surviving are one son, Timothy (Roxanne) Jones, San Antonio, Texas; one daughter, Pamela (Mike) Smith, Amarillo, Texas; two brothers, Ron Jones, Plano, Ill., and Don Jones, Leland, Ill.; two sisters, Carroll Jones, Wisconsin, and Judy Jones, Plano; six grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

Funeral services were held Oct. 19 at Good Shepherd Lutheran, Pleasanton. Burial was in St. John Lutheran Cemetery, Jourdanton.

AFLC memorials: October

AFLTS

Jeff Dahl

Vision

Marlys Oien

FLAPS

Harvey Hoops

World Missions

Sigurd Amundson

Home Missions

Sophie Boutiette

Gene Pearson

Sheldon Een

ARC hosts Christmas Festival

Events include craft sale, holiday dinner, play and musical performance during two-day event

The ARC will host its annual Christmas Festival on Dec. 12. The festival begins Saturday morning with a craft sale from 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. There will also be children's activities and a bake sale during this time. The cost for children's activities will be a donation.

The ARC will host a Scandinavian holiday dinner from 11:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., complete with lutefisk, torsk, Swedish meatballs, and Scandinavian holiday pastries. Children younger than 3 are free; ages 4-11 are \$10, and ages 12+ are \$18.

Saturday's events will end with the performance of "The CHRISTmas Boy," featuring gospel recording artist Steve Gamble and friends. "The CHRISTmas Boy" is a collection of traditional and original songs and dramatic selections telling the story of the time a small mountain village learned the true meaning of Christmas. The performance begins at 7 p.m. and is free to all.

Rooms are available for those wanting to spend the night at the ARC. Please contact Lori at 800-294-2877 by Dec. 4 to make a reservation.

On Sunday, Dec. 13, the festival will conclude with a free performance at 2 p.m. of "A Family Christmas," a cantata to be performed by the St. Croix Valley Christian Community Choir and Orchestra.

Upcoming AFLC retreats at the ARC include:

- AFLC Pastor's Retreat, Jan. 19-21, with special guest speaker Tom Kraeuter, an author, speaker, worship leader, and executive director of Training Resources. Kraeuter will lead several sessions on worship.

- Sno Daze (grades 7-12), Feb. 5-7

- SIDExSIDE (grades 4-7), Feb. 5-7

All registrations will be done by mail this year, not online. For more information, visit the ARC's Web site at www.arc-aflc.org. To register for these events, contact the ARC at 800-294-2877.

AFLC BENEVOLENCES Jan. 1- Oct. 31, 2009

FUND	TOTAL (subsidy)	REC'D IN OCTOBER	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	% TOTAL
General Fund	\$434,087	\$24,253	\$250,065	58
Evangelism	112,642	8,773	82,048	73
Youth Ministries	78,909	5,895	73,492	93
Parish Education	135,207	6,593	82,133	61
Seminary	244,110	20,830	157,207	64
Bible School	398,910	15,833	315,767	79
Home Missions	375,908	35,787	280,667	75
World Missions	327,017	33,558	208,144	64
Personal Support	435,500	37,691	341,953	79
TOTALS	\$2,542,290	\$189,214	\$1,791,475	70
TOTALS 2008	\$2,307,821	\$222,019	\$1,901,909	82

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.

No one can take His place

Boys who grew up on a small family farm, the middle child in a family of nine kids, didn't get electric train sets when they were young. My dad did get a train set when he was older. Technically he bought it for me, but in some ways, I think he was also buying it for himself.

My dad enjoyed helping me set up the train set on Christmas Eve and getting it running. He thought, however, he could get it going a little bit faster. After our attempts at technical improvements, the train ran a little funny from then on, but we enjoyed it anyway.



Pastor Craig Johnson

I enjoyed every Christmas Eve, mainly because of my dad. He was a mature, grown man who still had a bit of a little boy inside. The little boy came out at Christmas. He got to buy his son toys he had wished for but never received himself. He got to sit down and play with the toys with his son who loved him. And he got to eat lutefisk and lefse, and his son even liked doing that with him.

Then came the year when the Christmas Eve celebration was not the same. We had a tree and plenty of gifts. Food was abundant and tasted as good as ever. Decorations were in place. Music was playing. But it wasn't the same. Dad wasn't around any more. His life on this earth had come to an end the summer before.

I was a teenager, the youngest in the

family and the closest to my dad. The rest of my family was sensitive to my situation and concerned. They made a special effort to try to find the right gifts and prepare the foods I like. I appreciated what they did, but none of it could change the reality of the situation. Somebody was missing. No food or gifts or decorations could fill that place.

Some years later, after the deaths of other family members, another Christmas was approaching. As the season began I attended a concert put on by the Christian musician Michael Card. He sang the song, "Immanuel." That night those familiar words brought needed encouragement to my soul. "Immanuel, our God is with us. And if God is with us, who could stand against us? Our God is with us, Immanuel."

Christmas celebrations sometimes have a touch of sadness as we miss ones we wish we were with us. What helps us in dealing with the loneliness is remembering Who is with us and will remain with us forever. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14, NIV). We are not alone. Our Savior has come.

On an episode of television's *The Cosby Show*, Bill Cosby tried to sneak a piece of cake and then filled the hole he had made with paper towels and spread the frosting over it. It didn't work.

We have holes in our lives. People we miss. Family situations that are far from

ideal. Lives that don't bear any resemblance to a Hallmark card. Sometimes the holes seem a little bigger at Christmas. We try to fill them with things that don't fit.

Decorations and lights, food and presents won't fill the holes of your life any better than paper towels and frosting can fill a hole in a cake. To fill the major holes of our lives we need Immanuel.

Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that

Decorations and lights, food and presents won't fill the holes of your life any better than paper towels and frosting can fill a hole in a cake. To fill the major holes in our lives we need Immanuel.

they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). The evil one, the world and our own sin create holes of loneliness, fear and guilt. Jesus comes to fill holes with love and life.

Christmas isn't the same if Someone is missing. A person can have all kinds of other "someones," but if you do not have Jesus you are missing out on the heart of Christmas. No other person or thing can fill His spot. Jesus wants to fill our lives with a joy and peace that is complete and overflowing.

May the Lord bless you with a wonderful Christmas!

something to share

Be a light

BY KANDY BAUDER

Christmas 2008 was made a little more interesting in the Bauder house thanks to a traveling neighborhood outdoor Christmas decoration known as The Lone Candle. We were honored to place it on our roof this past Christmas. The candle appeared in the front of our home Thanksgiving weekend with a letter attached informing us of its history and the meaning behind this good-natured, conversation-starting tradition on our street.

According to the letter, the candle is to be displayed proudly at all times in the front of the property, lit in the evening hours for as long as all other Christmas decorations are present at our dwelling. We also had the option of placing the candle on our roof "as a mighty beacon" or in our front yard "as a subtle symbol."

For our neighborhood, the lone candle represents the refusal to conform to a tradition of neighborhood theme decorating for Christmas, where every resident must decorate the front of their homes in the same theme. The lone candle really represents the fact that our neighborhood has chosen to be different and that we are not afraid of letting the lone candle shine brightly for others to see.

Maybe this will cause someone to ask why we so proudly shine our candle, which may not be the prettiest decoration in Sioux Falls, but it shines its bright light for all to see.

It is amazing to me how very much we as Christians are like that lone candle. We are called to shine the light of Jesus in our lives. Sometimes we stand alone and other times we are

surrounded by fellow lights. As Christians, we are asked not to be conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds. Then we will be able to find God's will in our lives (Romans 12:2). Sometimes we may be the only one shining our light while those around us are doing what pleases themselves and the world. This can be a difficult and lonely position to be in sometimes.

The lone candle also represents the light in a Christian's life. John 1:4-5 says "In him (Jesus) was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it."

It only takes a little spark of light to overcome darkness. Jesus asked us to be light. In Matthew 5:14-16 Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

I am asking each of you to be the lone candle on your street and shine God's light for all to see.

Dear heavenly Father, thank you for light and for all that it does and represents. Please help me to stand firm and be a light for You in the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Bauder is a member of Living Word Free Lutheran, Sioux Falls, S.D. Reprinted with permission by Living Stone News (livingstone-news.com).