# THE LUTHERAND DECEMBER 2012 AMBASSADOR





## The weak of this world

BY RACHELLE KLEMME

hristmas can be a stressful time of year. For some, it is about enduring loss, or severe illness, or poverty and hunger, or geographic separation, or the death of a loved one.

To the luckier ones among us, it is characterized by relatively frivolous forms of stress: The gift I was trying to find for someone was sold out of the local store and I'll have to drive 50 miles to find the item. All this extra church, family, and community involvement is so exhausting. I have so many Christmas parties to attend that it's hard to squeeze in an appoint-

ment for the flu shot—and wouldn't it be nice to have a vaccine for the "stomach flu," too?

All those people in the Nativity set—the shepherds and Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus—look like they have it so easy.

Wait a minute ...

"First-world problems" is an internet meme poking fun at the little irritations of life only experienced by people who have a comfortable lifestyle to begin with. A friend showed me a *Saturday Night Live* skit portraying technology reviewers complaining about small issues with the iPhone 5—only to have an awkward exchange with the peasant factory workers who make fun of the reviewers' idea of having a hard life.

With first-world Christmas problems, it is easy to feel a disconnect between our experience and the actual first Christmas problems. But being fully human as well as fully God, Jesus connects with us and was certainly not immune to problems.



Before Jesus was born, He was already in a certain amount of danger: when Joseph learned Mary was pregnant, he had to mull over how to deal with the situation in a way that wouldn't end with her dying from a concussion or bludgeoning due to the public execution of unmarried mothers in those days.

Mary herself felt the impact of life as a Jewish woman under Roman oppression. As serene and gentle as she is portrayed to be, she had quite a bit to say against "the proud in the thoughts of their hearts" and "the mighty from their thrones" in Luke 1's Magnificat.

Mary had to give birth while they were traveling, and with no room in the inn—let alone a hospital—the baby was placed in a manger. The first visitors welcoming the incarnate God were ordinary shepherds.

Then some months after that, Joseph, Mary and Jesus were refugees fleeing from King Herod. Herod was a powerful ruler who already felt intimidated by a toddler, enough to murder all the baby boys in the area and turn a devout, harmless couple into international fugitives.

A child with that kind of upbringing would usually not be expected to go very far.

But with God using the weak things of the world to shame the strong, and the foolish things of the world to upstage the wise, Jesus grew up to save the world from sin anyway.

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In Jesus we know all of God that we shall ever know. and in Jesus we have all of God that we can ever need.

—Paul S. Rees

We who give ear to the voice of John, we who follow the pointing finger of John, that great Advent preacher, can never take Christ for granted, can never grow casual about Him and His mercy. Nor can we who have heard the Baptist's Advent cry ever think again of repentance as a placid, pious exercise, a sort of routine religious daily dozen. It is the death of the old man and the creation of the new man as God's own.

--- Martin H. Franzmann

It takes chapters, books, to tell many stories scarcely worth the reading. Here [in the Christmas gospel] is the greatest story ever told. It records one of the two greatest events that ever took place on this planet. And it is written in less than a page, in a score of lines, in a few hundred words.

—R.E. Golladay

Who can add to Christmas? The perfect motive is that God so loved the world. The perfect gift is that He gave His only Son. The only requirement is to believe in Him. The reward of faith is that you will have everlasting life.

—Corrie ten Boom

#### BY PASTOR NATHAN MINNICH

efore there was a so-called holiday season, before there were presents, before there were carols and lights on trees, before there was a church established in this world, before there was a people longing for freedom from sin and evil, before there was a sentimental service of candlelight: I AM.

Amid the cacophony of emotions and stresses that arise when the preceding thoughts are called to mind, there is a genuine calm in the words I AM. It is a calm that seems to cut swiftly through the mess that has been made of Christmas. It is a calm that provides divine constancy amid human confusion. If every human paradigm that attempts to explain the meaning of this time of the year would pass away, there would alone remain God's paradigm for all creation. This most complete ordering of all that is now, ever was, and ever shall be was revealed on the most holy of occasions, the very day that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Before the Church and its liturgies, before the first angels sang "Gloria in excelsis Deo," before everything that is seen and unseen, and—most significantly—before the virgin birth: I AM.

So often our own understanding of time, and in some cases the life of the Church, causes us to think of Christmas as the beginning. Of course it was the beginning of this new way in which God sought to speak to His people. Yet, as the days of Advent should remind us, there was a great existence before. And much preparation had been made for the moment when God would leave the splendor of the heavenly kingdom to wrap Himself in flesh. It was through Christ all things were put into place for this miraculous event ... His own preparation for a final revelation.

Before the prophets, before the star in the East, before the law and the inevitable fall of humankind: I AM.

Who could more clearly explain a plan for all life except God Himself in the simple revelation contained in that name? As we so often repeat in the Nicene Creed, God reveals the eternal plan in Him, through whom all things were made. The very stall where Mary and Joseph rested was created through Him who would lie there in the infant flesh of Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Son of man. The consistency of creation can be assured to us in this very thought: before anything we know to be true through faith, Christ was present, and thus He can truly say "I AM" (John 8:58). To give any authenticity to the ways in which Christ Jesus describes the nature of who He truly is, one must first understand this concept of time. After this, all things will begin to fall into their prepared places, places that exist in the past, present, and future. I am bread, light, gate, shepherd, resurrection, and vine all become clearer descriptions of the nature of God and of His Christ, and reveal the plan for conquering sin and death, as well as His plan to reign when all is accomplished (Revelation 11:15).

The fourteenth chapter of the Holy Gospel according to St. John reminds us, perhaps, of the most significant words spoken by the Word made flesh. It is a glimpse of the true nature of God. Jesus said to Thomas, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). This most telling exclamation may confuse the human mind at a superficial reading, but when considered within the timeline proposed, one could see a special relationship that surpasses our simple understanding.

Christ's revelation of God, I AM, leaves us with both comfort and responsibility. Comfort in that we have a direct interaction with God in flesh, and responsibility that we are now tasked with retelling this story to others. We can share the gospel with others by exclaiming, "He is!"

We can use all the ways that Christ has revealed and explained Himself to teach others. He is bread, light, gate, shepherd, resurrection, vine, and the way, the truth, and the life! Through the paradoxical ways in which these are understood (feast and host, shepherd and lamb, vine and branches), God is revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

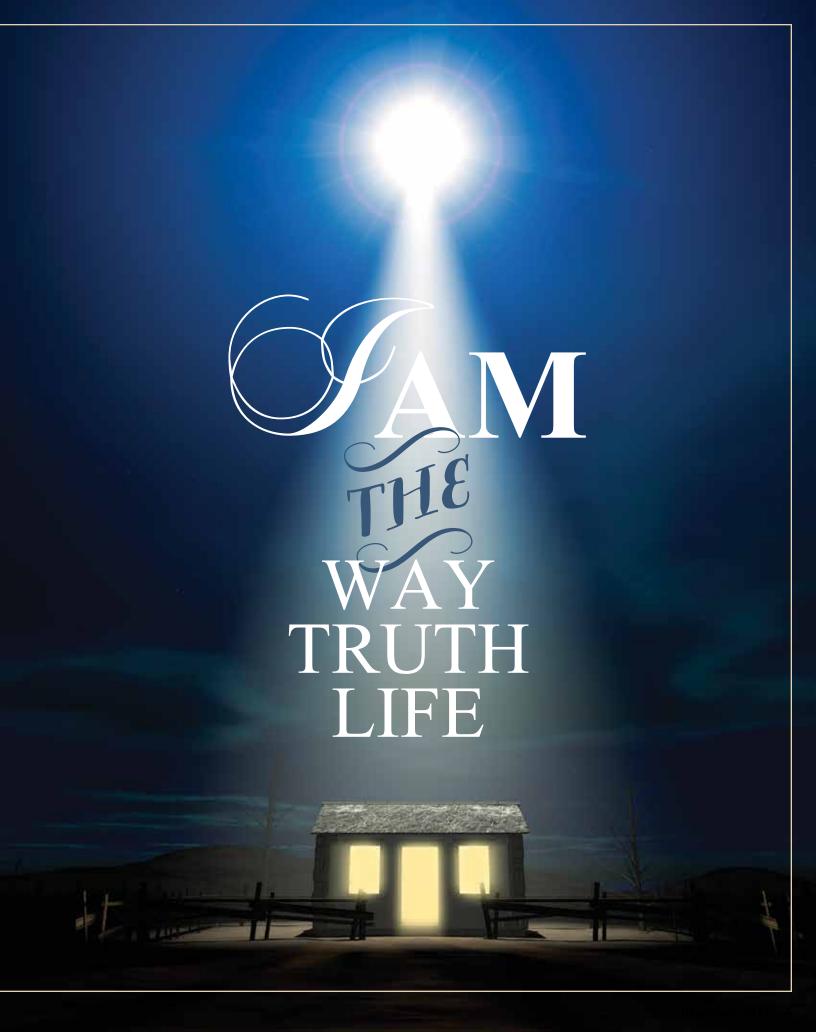
This Christmas how should we worship Him? We should worship him as *He is.* In all ways, Christ revealed to us the nature of God, the Three in One, as He responded to Thomas. The *way* of the Father is His plan of creation. The Father is where all *truth* originates. He is most certainly the *life* everlasting because He is the beginning and the end and intends to restore all things from creation (Acts 3:21).

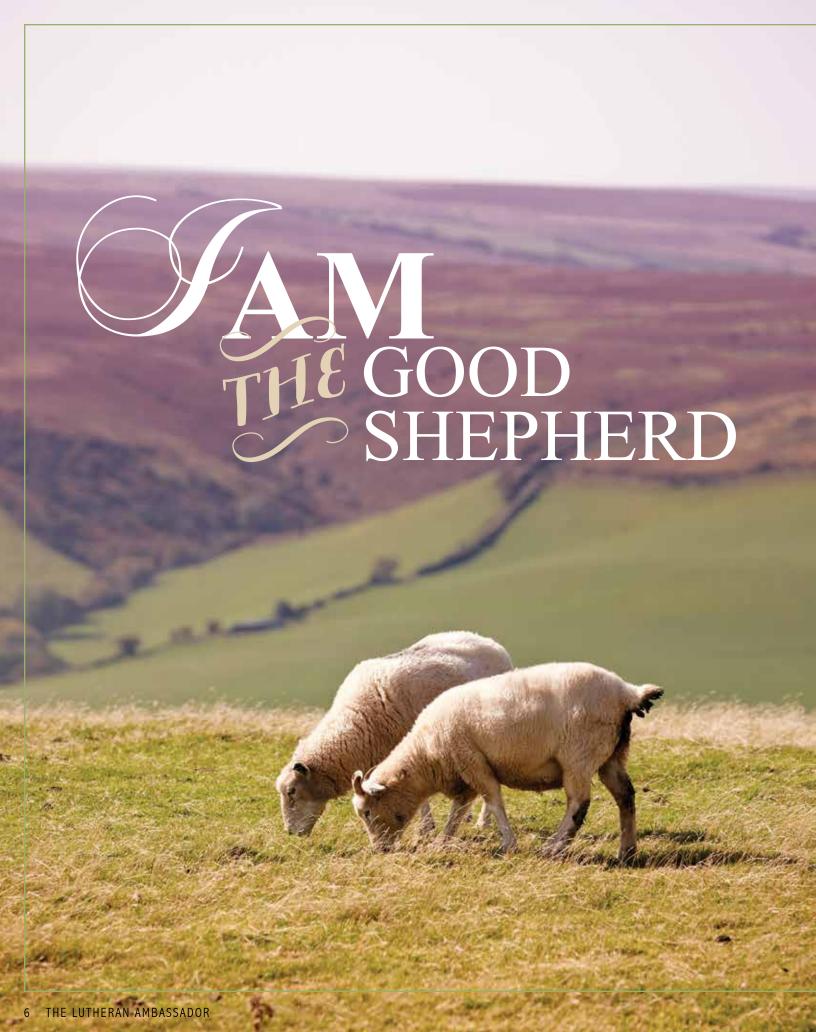
The *way* of the Holy Spirit is revealed as the one who enlivens and lifts up, just as Mary is exalted and filled with the honor of bearing the Word as flesh. The *truth* of the Holy Spirit is that which awakens our faith, and breathes into us the *life* that is truly full of the same breath that moved upon the face of the deep, and into Adam, and in these last days the Church.

Finally, the *way* shown to us in Jesus is the way of the servant, the One who came down and dwelt among us. The *truth* revealed in the person of Jesus Christ is the truth that fulfills the prophetic voice of old, embodies the prophecy itself, and directly speaks the Word with authority. Jesus spoke to us the word of truth and showed us the way of the servant to bring to us *life*. He has the authority over life, as we know it. He was born so that life would rise from the tomb at His command (John 11:43), and He died so that He could take it up again (John 10:17). *Gloria in excelsis deo*.

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<sup>1</sup>Engelbrecht, Edward A. *The Lutheran Difference.* (Concordia Publishing House, 2010) 305.





#### BY TIM HERSET

#### "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

lat on my back, eyes open wide, the events of the day race through my mind. Energy is focused on the task at hand; falling asleep. Nothing seems to work, so I resort to counting sheep. "One, two, skip a few, two-hundred-three, two-hundred-four, two-hundred-five ... this is dumb!" Tossing and turning under the covers, frustration boils inside me. I ask myself: "Why can't I fall asleep? Then my mind wanders like a lost sheep. "How many other boys my age have a bedtime? Who else is counting sheep? If we added up together all the sheep we've all counted so far, how many would that be? I should get back to counting." Trying to start counting again, I realize I'd lost count. So then I start all over again.

Night after night, this routine repeated. Nowadays this isn't the case, but I often wonder if Jesus ever counted sheep. After all, he is the Good Shepherd.

In John 10, we read two parables concerning sheep. The first figure of speech confused the people Jesus was talking to, so He explained it to them. After pointing out Satan's purpose in the world ("to steal and kill and destroy") Jesus tells the people why He came to earth. He came so that all people "may have life and have it abundantly" (vs. 10). Then Jesus makes an extraordinary statement. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (vs. 11). Jesus speaks of Himself as a shepherd, and these sheep He refers to, they are a picture of people.

All of us—good, bad, pretty, ugly, young, old—all people are created by Him. We are all sheep. As the prophet Isaiah puts it, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). As a result of our rebellious nature (called sin) we are separated from God. Our relationship with our Father is severed. We wander in the fields alone. We have a desire to be known and to be loved. On our own we are helpless. But, we are not hopeless.

Back in John 10:14, Jesus continues, "I am the good

shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep." For some this verse brings comfort, as they are aware of what Christ has done for them and they walk daily in a relationship with Him. For others this verse stirs things up inside. Jesus mentions them, too, when He says, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold." Here we see Jesus counting sheep.

In contrast to the sheep counting I do, Jesus has an eternal purpose with transformational power. He sees all the sheep ever created and notices that some are not close to Him. These people are all too often looked down upon by the sheep that are in His fold. We look outside the four walls of our security and see the helpless sheep looking for hope. They have a desire to be known and long to be wholly loved. Yet, we want to be safe inside where we feel comfortable in our sheep pen. But "the other sheep" are outside in the cold. Our friends who don't know Jesus are just like us; they are sheep. Jesus laid down His life for us and for them. But they may not know that to be true.

Knowing Jesus and being known by Him brings us to a place where we can rightly see ourselves as sheep. As sheep we can be ourselves. Some of us may be dirty, tired, disheveled, lost, confused, or absolutely done with everything. Some of us may be clean, energized, put together, on the right path, focused, and absolutely enthused about everything. No matter where you are, Jesus wants to know you and be known by you.

Jesus laid His life down for the sheep.

Tonight, as you lay down to sleep, whether or not you are counting sheep, ask yourself this question: Do I want to be in a relationship with Jesus, the Good Shepherd?

Herset, a Young Life staff associate in Kalispell, Mont., is a member of Faith Lutheran Church.

#### BY WENDY WESTLAKE

#### "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness" (John 8:12).

y youngest daughter, Nikki, was married this past August. Our whole family prepared for the big day, making invitations, planning the menu, and choosing the reception site. We decided to host the reception at our local 4H building. Unfortunately, it wasn't much to look at—just a big pole barn with a cement floor. Our challenge was to transform that space and make it beautiful for one evening. I had a plan. I ordered strings of LED lights from Hong Kong, special spotlights designed to bathe the perimeter walls in a soft glow, and candles for every table. My family often teased me because my mantra during those weeks was, "It's all about the lighting!" It actually worked pretty well. I was amazed. With our simple lighting we created mood and drama in that ordinary place.

It's Christmas time, and when I think about the scene with the most fantastic, dramatic lighting ever recorded in the Bible, one picture comes to mind—when the angels appeared to the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem. We tell that beloved part of the Christmas story every year in our plays and Sunday school programs. But let's face it ... we just don't have the wattage to convey the drama of that event.

Think about the scene in terms of dark and light. Imagine those shepherds, tending their sheep as they'd done so many nights before. Perhaps there was a bit of starlight or moonlight, but basically it was dark out in those fields. Out of nowhere an angel appeared and the glory of the Lord shone around them. One angel, illuminating all of them with the glory of the Lord. And how did they react? They were terrified! The angel told them not to be afraid and then relayed to them the great news of Jesus' birth and where to find Him. It's a good thing the angel told them not to be afraid because suddenly that one angel was joined by a great company of the heavenly host. Imagine the light display. The whole sky must have lit up with angels radiating the glory of the Lord. The magnitude of the event warranted such splendor. Nothing like this had ever happened in the fields of Bethlehem or anywhere else on earth. Jesus, the light of the world, had arrived.

Fast forward about 30 years. The baby Jesus is now a grown man. He's teaching in the temple area where He made this statement, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Shouldn't there have been flashes of lightning,

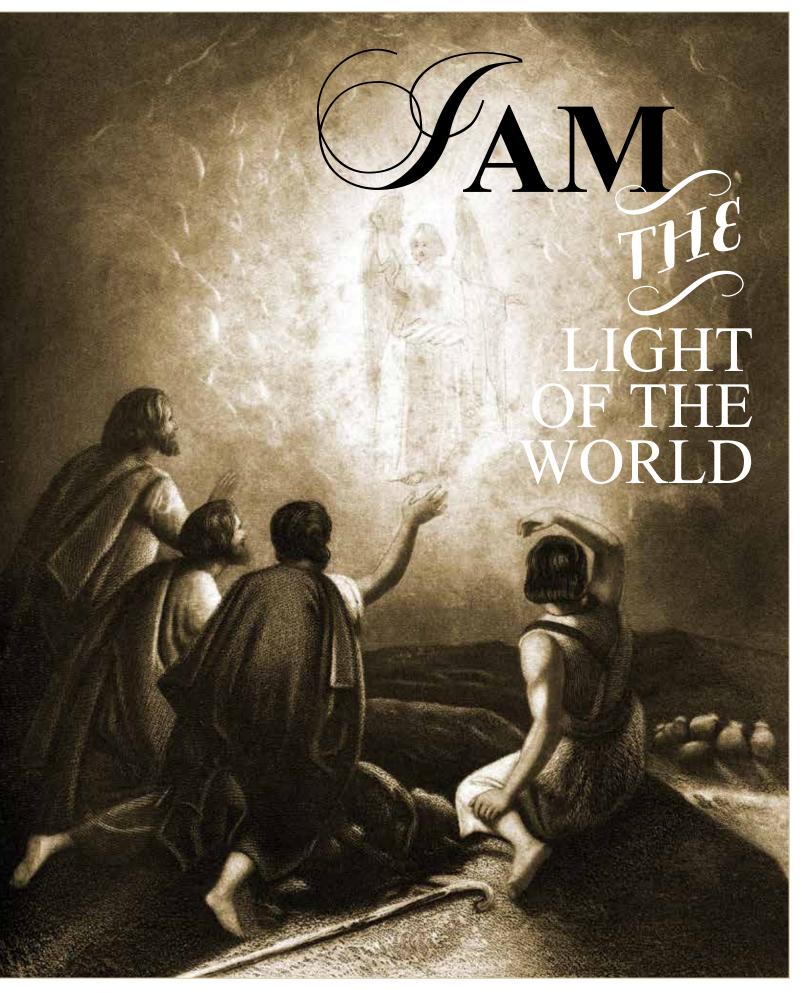
or angels singing to accompany such an announcement? But that's not exactly what happened. Instead, the Pharisees immediately challenged Him. In fact, some of the most volatile words exchanged between Jesus and the Jews are recorded in the next few paragraphs. The Pharisees claimed Jesus' testimony wasn't valid. Jesus told them they would die in their sins because they didn't recognize who He was. "Who are you?" They asked. When Jesus told them they stubbornly refused to accept the truth. Finally, they tried to stone Jesus when He stated, "... before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58).

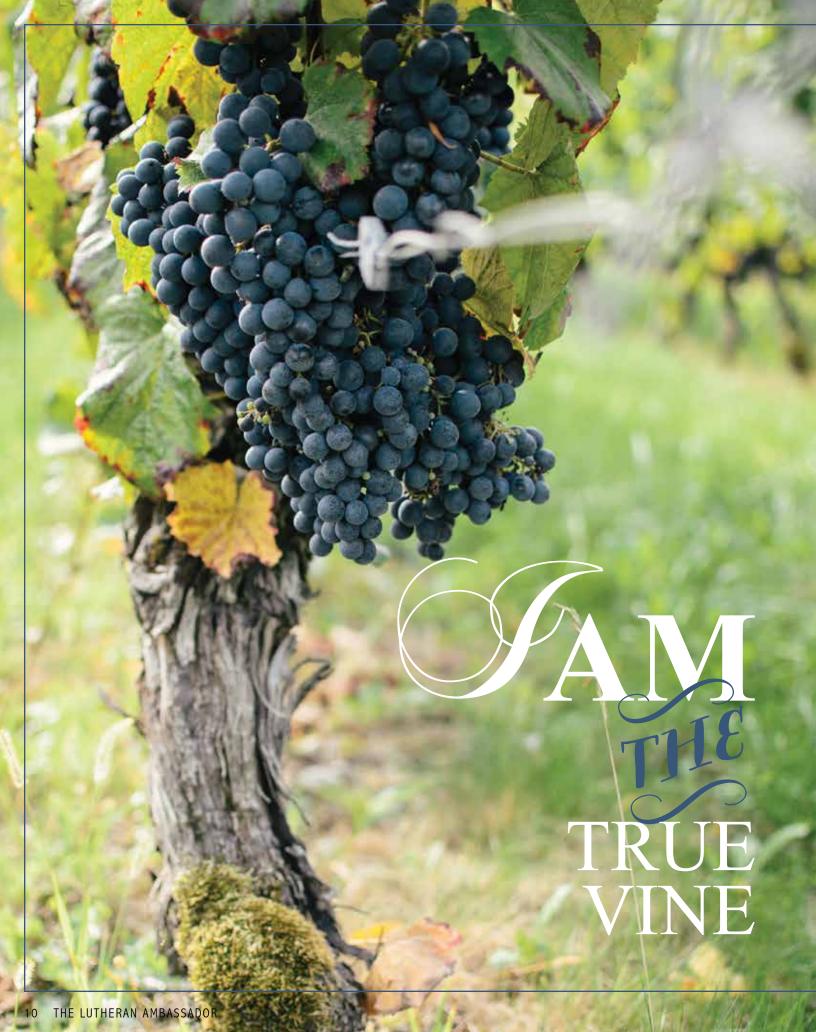
How could they have been so wrong? How could the Jews, who had been waiting for the Messiah all those years, not recognize Him when He was right in front of them? Perhaps they were unwilling to accept Jesus' true identity because in order to accept who *He* really was, they had to acknowledge who *they* really were. If Jesus was "the light of the world," then, they were in darkness, needing the light. Sometimes the most difficult thing for us humans is to recognize how needy we are.

It's interesting that Jesus' conversation with the Jews is sandwiched between the accounts of the woman caught in adultery and the healing of the man born blind. The woman, humiliated, faced a literal death sentence. The man, blind from birth, had never seen ... anything. In addition, he lived with the stigma that either he or his parents must have done something awful to cause his condition. When they met Jesus their lives were changed. Neither of them objected when He stepped into their world. They didn't say to Jesus, "Your testimony is not valid." It would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? They knew they were in a "dark" place and needed the light of a Savior and a Healer.

We aren't any different. We also need Jesus to rescue us from the dominion of darkness. We just need to acknowledge that we need Him and let Him in. "Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in" (O Little Town of Bethlehem, by Phillips Brooks). When Christ enters our lives, He changes everything. He tells us, "You are the light of the world." What will you do this Christmas season? Who will you talk to? Where will you go to shine the light of Christ?

Westlake is a member of Our Saviour's Lutheran, Zumbrota, Minn., where her husband, Pastor Eric Westlake, serves.





#### BY PASTOR DAVID PETERSON

#### "No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine" (John 15:1).

hen my sons and I were tending to a Bradford pear tree that grows in our front yard, it became a teachable moment about true life. As we addressed the tree, I pointed to the false shoots or "suckers" as I learned to call them—that sprouted up at the base of the trunk. They drew away vital life and resources from the rest of the tree. With hatchet in hand, I made a hasty end to the sprouts that would try to compete with the real trunk so that the real tree trunk would be free of these distractions of energy and focus.

In our distracted, energy-sapping world we must also address true life "suckers" which rob us of real peace that is ours in Jesus Christ, our source of true life and salvation.

On His way to Gethsemane, Jesus paused in a nearby vineyard to share His heart with His followers, choosing His last words and their unmistakable images of life carefully. The One who sat at the table with them—the One who humbly washed their feet and spoke to their troubled hearts—now spoke to them of true life. Perhaps picking up a vine that lay along the ground, Jesus said, "I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser" (John 15:1). In the last and ultimate of His seven "I am" statements, Jesus declares Himself to be the source of true life, "the true vine."

His word "true" here reflects that He is the real deal: genuine and authentic, not a cheap copy or even what others may want Him to be. He is not a sucker vine of formal religion draining life away from the lives of His followers. Jesus is the complete and true reflection of His Father's greatest desires: life! Jesus is the true image of the Father.

Jesus is truth, and His words are truer than ever in our relativist culture. His truth pierces our darkness with the Father's joy exclaiming, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). In this unity, Jesus welcomes His followers of every generation to abide in the same relationship of love and power that exists among Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He also challenges His followers to bear the enduring fruit of belonging to Him.

In this statement, our vision of the Father takes new shape and our ministry takes new meaning and power. "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes

away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:2).

A closer reading reveals something quite wonderful. The Greek text may also be read: Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He "lifts up" or "cleanses." Sometimes branches fall into the dirt. Then the vinedresser carefully lifts the branch out of the dirt and away from the pests. He washes each leaf and secures it so that the leaves may resume their important role in the sunlight that assists in the production of the grapes.

Our ministry is just such an activity of lifting up the fallen and providing the gentle care and cleansing that is needed to restore each person to his or her destiny. What a great joy to be part of the Father's business, even as our Savior, with care and compassion, reached out to the last, the least, and the lost, restoring them to true life.

Jesus is working in my heart so that I might see these fallen branches in the same way as my kids when they were toddling and first learning to walk. Who among us would treat our child severely because he or she stumbled while taking those first steps? No! I'll bet you ran to your child and picked her up, held her in your arms, maybe kissed a boo-boo and let her keep trying. We have a wonderful God who does the same with each of us as we are exploring and growing as His children.

I stop sometimes and ponder what it means to have the word "free" in the name of the churches we serve. Are we free of the "sucker vines"? Our joy and our life is to partner with the very One who said that He was and continues to be "the true vine and His Father is the vinedresser." In Christ, we are free to be part of God's magnificent activity of living free and sharing that true life and freedom with others. I pray that we will enjoy the sweetness of this wine, the joy we have in our fellowship together, and the knowledge that we are bringing forth the fruit of His true life in us. It is bountiful and enduring, the only hope of lasting transformation in this world.

Peterson, the East Coast AFLC representative, serves the Landisburg-Loysville parish (Tressler Memorial and Mt. Zion) in Pennsylvania.

#### BY SUSAN PARSLEY

"If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51).

hat a simple thing, bread. It is on the table in some form just about every day, not just in America, but all over the world. It tastes good, gives us energy, and keeps us healthy. In the same way, Jesus wants us to partake of what He has to offer, wants to sustain us through good times and bad, and wants us to keep living His best. So how is the Son of God like bread? The bread of life?

I own a bread maker. I do not like to spend time in the kitchen, especially kneading bread dough. But, this little bread maker does all the kneading for me, churning out delicious buns, filling the air with that fresh-bread smell. "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma" (Ephesians 5:1-2). The work has been done for me, as Christ has already completed the work of salvation.

I eat three meals every day and don't think too much about what good food does for my body. But bread doesn't do much for me unless I eat it. Through the amazing digestive system, bread becomes a part of the body, giving energy even to the smallest cells. In the same way, Jesus wants us to depend on Him for our salvation, our life. "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

When I went through cancer treatment several years ago, my doctors told me that I needed to eat in order to stay strong enough to fight off infection. Bread was one of the few foods that tasted good, and some days it was the only food I would consume. If we don't eat, even when healthy, it can affect our energy level, our ability to fight off sickness, our concentration, our temperament. "This is

the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:50-51).

Of course, I can simply say, "No, thank you." The Lord doesn't force me to eat this bread. He sets the loaf before me and gives me the power to turn Him down. Jesus had literally filled the stomachs of more than 5,000 people before using that as an illustration to show them that their hunger would never be satisfied apart from the spiritual nourishment He offers. That was not the kind of bread His followers were expecting of Him. "After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him" (John 6:66). I do this all the time; I want Jesus to be what I think He should be. I don't want a simple loaf of bread. I want cake!

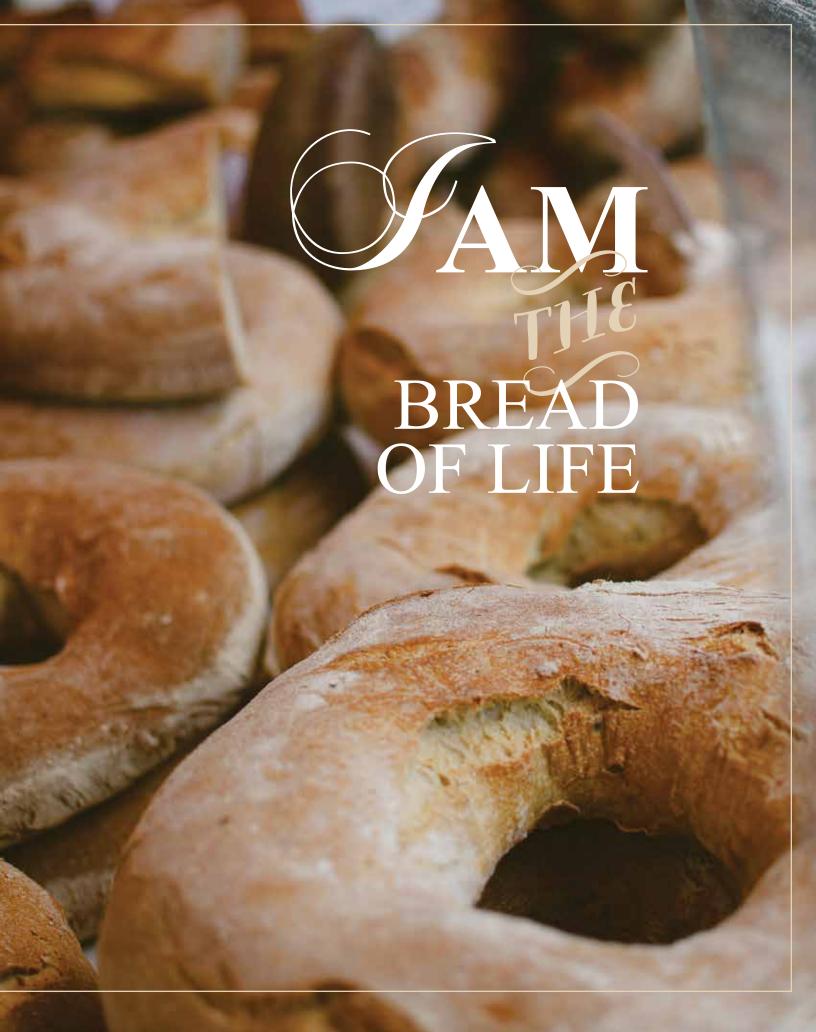
Still, the Lord sets the Bread of Life before me and waits. He offers promises if I eat of it: eternal life, satisfaction, peace of mind. If I walk away from the table, He also lets me know what is in store for me: eternal death and the wrath of God. I need what He has to offer. I eat the Bread.

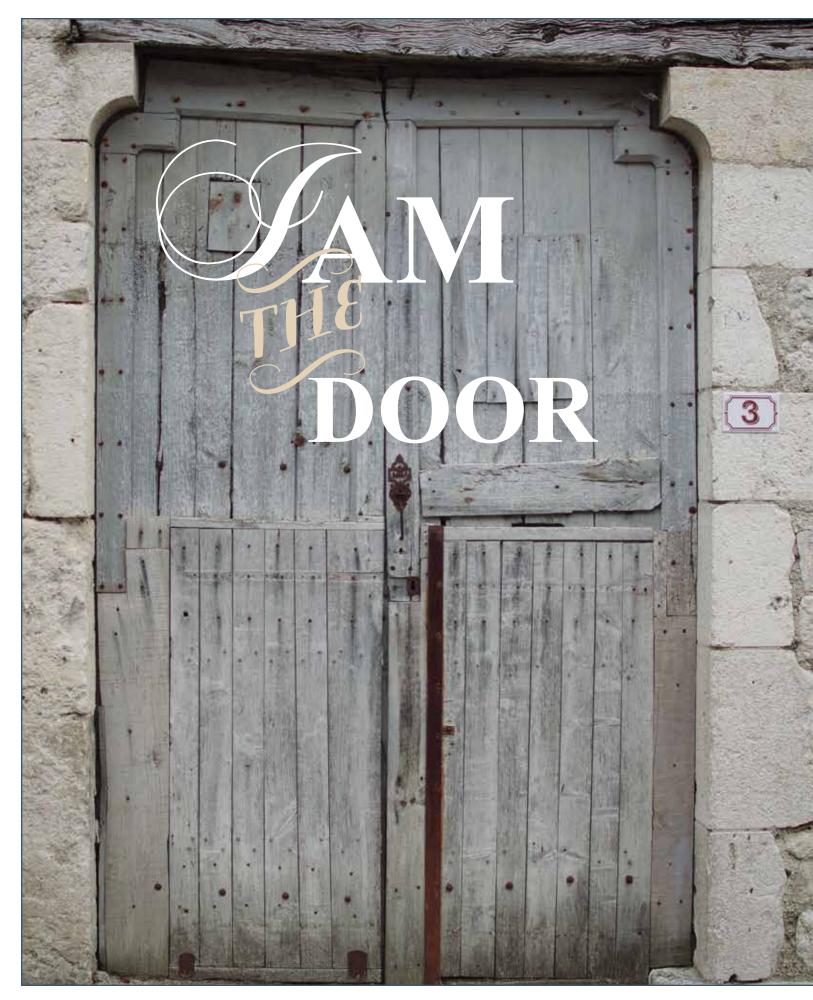
"O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray; Cast out our sin, and enter in, Be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels The great glad tidings tell, O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Immanuel."

—O Little Town of Bethlehem

Immanuel. God with us. The Bread of Life.

Parsley is a member of Christ the King Lutheran, Pipestone, Minn.





#### BY PASTOR JOHN AMUNDSON

#### "Whoever enters through me will be saved" (John 10:9).

he door to my office at Immanuel Lutheran perhaps says it best. Taped to the outer frame are pieces of paper with the names of our high school youth on them. Along with the names are added messages such as, "June 23rd—it is now 12:45 a.m.," or, "She is a walking zombie but this is worth it." The papers were taped on my door following a summer sleepover and a week of leading singing at our community vacation Bible school program.

Through the doors of our church these youths have come. Some have come because it was time for them to be in confirmation. But many have come because the youth have invited them. They have come and have stayed, sitting through confirmation classes, being a part of service projects and sleepovers. They have come because someone said to them, "Come and see, come and hear about Jesus." They have been invited to come through the door of our church, and they have opened the door that Jesus has offered to them.

And isn't this what it really is all about? Isn't it about more than memorizing *Luther's Catechism* or Bible verses because that is what we have always done for confirmation? Isn't it really about engaging in this personal relationship with Jesus Christ as their Savior and knowing the promise of forgiveness and salvation? I look at these youths, so many of whom come from broken homes and non-traditional homes. I see a young teen who gave her life to Christ following an AFLBS Ambassadors concert two years ago and was baptized that very Wednesday night at 9:30 p.m. I see a young man who, after an invitation, came to confirmation and one day wandered into Sunday worship because he had nothing else to do. He rarely misses worship or confirmation.

I give thanks to God that these kids have pushed on the door that opens to the promise of forgiveness and a

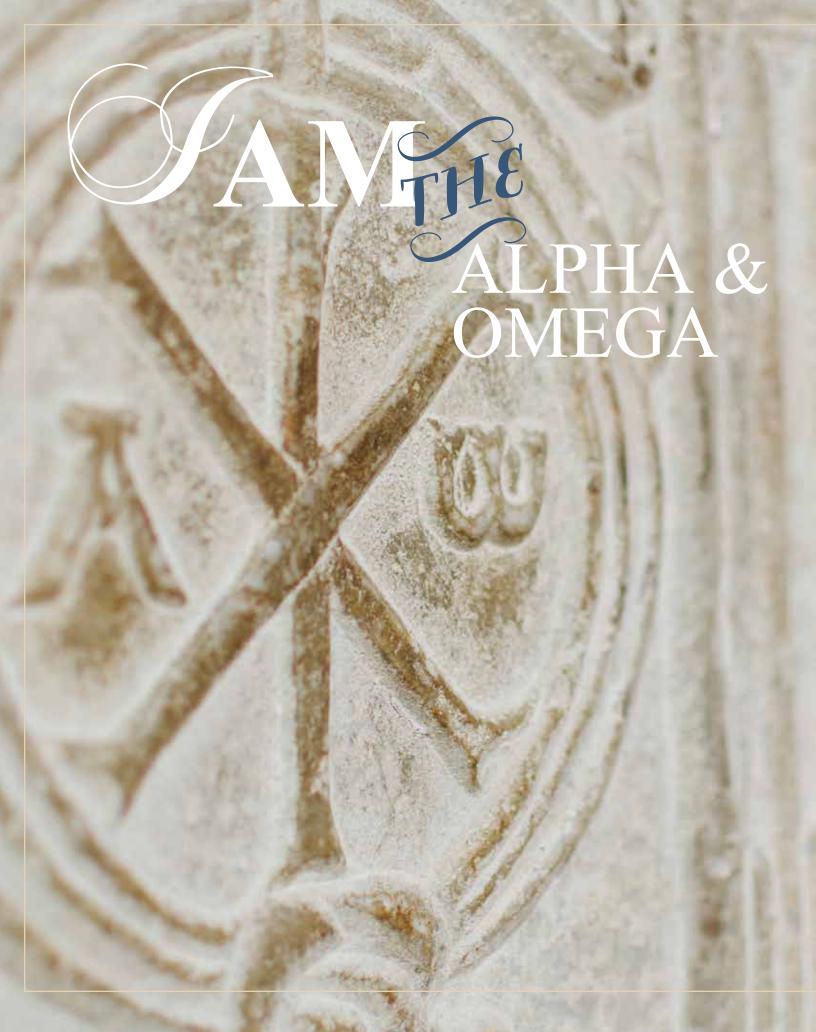
relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus came as the baby at Bethlehem for each one of these kids. There are nights after confirmation class when I have tears in my eyes knowing the painful journey so many of these youths have been on. But they have found a home. They have hope because of the door of Jesus Christ opened to them.

Revelation 3:20 says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." I thought of that verse not long after Carrie had filled in for me one night. Carrie is a church member with a passion for youth ministry. That night, the youths had had a rough week and just needed to vent. Carrie ran home and came back with ice cream. As they ate and talked, Jesus listened and walked with them through that night.

And Jesus said, "I am the door, if anyone enters by me he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:9). I remember as a child opening the little doors on the family Advent calendar, always knowing that on that last day baby Jesus would be there. We would sing, "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus." Those words have an even deeper meaning for our youths. They know that Jesus has come into their hearts.

I never know how many kids will be there on Wednesday evenings. Last fall one of the students pulled up to the church, hopped out of her car and happily proclaimed, "Pastor, I brought another one!" Our door stands open, and these young people walk through it because of the simple invitation from their friends: "Come and see, come and hear, come through the open door and know Jesus."

Amundson serves Immanuel Lutheran, New Leipzig, N.D., and Trinity Lutheran, Mott, N.D.



#### BY PATRICIA PILLMAN

"... who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8).

re you ever disturbed by the situations we see happening all around us? Corrupt, decaying societies, continual war threats, crippling natural disasters, despicable sins gone unpunished ... the woeful list goes on and on. I'm so grateful that God has the final word on all these proceedings. This truth cannot be more aptly expressed than in His name, the Alpha and Omega. This name, in fact, is full of meaning for believers, if we will take the time to delve into it.

When Jesus declares that "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last" (Revelation 22:13), He is reminding us of His eternal nature. He goes beyond time both before and after, and none of these current issues can touch Him. It reminds us that everything revolves around God ... not us. He is the first and the last, not us. As I studied this, I was convicted. How often do I truly keep the Lord first and last in my life? Does He always have the first word and the final say on all my actions, words, attitudes, etc.?

Interestingly, every recorded instance of this name of God in the Bible (there are four) is found in the Book of Revelation, two times in the first chapter and then once each in the last two chapters. There are many frightening things described in Revelation about the end times, but God prefaces and ends His book with the assurance that, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8). We shouldn't fear, for God is on the throne, He has control, His power is limitless, and from beginning to end He is God. If we ever are tempted to question God's justice based on what we see around us currently, we needn't doubt. One day all will be set to right according to His perfect standard, and in the very book that describes in detail how His final judgment will come about, He declares Himself to be the beginning and the end. What a comforting thought!

Another aspect of this name deals with language. Alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Letters build words, and Jesus has declared Himself to be the Word. God created our capacity for language just as He created everything else, and He compasses everything that is worth saying in any language.

Indeed, in Revelation 1:11 (King James version), Christ even prefaces the instructions He gives to the seven churches with a declaration of this name: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last: and, What you see, write in a book, and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." He has given us His Word, which is a living voice that tells of Him who is Alpha and Omega. All of God's names are included between alpha and omega, so it is, in a sense, summing up the whole nature of God in one mighty name. This feature of Alpha and Omega reminds me of another name of Jesus stated in Hebrews 12:2, "the Author and Finisher of our faith." He has written the plan of salvation since before the creation of the world, and He will finish His plan according to His own perfect will.

One final thought on this powerful name of God: As I studied His name in context within Revelation, I noticed that this name is often surrounded by Christ's promises and prophecies of sure events that are to come. For instance, Revelation 21:6 says, "And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely." This instance is followed by a promise that those who overcome will inherit all things and be included in God's family. God uses this name to comfort and give assurance and extra emphasis to His promises for believers. Christ is coming quickly, as this name in essence reminds us. God started this world with the end in mind, and His plan has gone forth throughout the centuries.

As we reflect this Advent season on the first and second comings of Christ, let us remember Christ's "I Am Alpha and Omega" declaration and all of the assurance and promises summed up with this powerful name. Christ has revealed His names to us to be our strongholds. When we are tempted to fear or waver in our faith, let us run to our Alpha and Omega and find strength and comfort in the One who started this world and will finish it in His own good time. Amen and Amen!

Pillman and her husband, Justo, and son, Nathanael, are AFLC missionaries serving in Cuenca, Ecuador.



# Christmas Tree Junner By Kristian Ourom

hat he was lame was something no one was concerned about. It was an affliction he had to come to terms with himself. He had come from flat farmland many, many years ago and settled up here in the valley, on Korphaugen, a plot of ground right under Korp Mountain. Of outbuildings there was only one. But the cabin stood there half slanting, leaking and wretched, and Gunner wasn't one of those who took much trouble to better his circumstances. He plugged and filled the worst gaps with moss and otherwise left it to get by as best it could.

Gunner Fransplassen was his full name. He had roamed about for many years, he himself said, doing this and that. Some people thought he had been something of an impulsive person, unstable and with a tem-

per he had great difficulty keeping under control. He had never married, and perhaps that was fortunate. He could have scarcely managed to support a family in the traditional way, so possessed was he by strong drink. So he kept away from that, eking out an existence. Then he would rest from labor, maybe for days, once he had something to live on. However, he wasn't of those who shrank from daily work. He could cut a cord of wood, or boards of lumber, laboring in the severest conditions for a whole day, now and then. But never long in one place. Gunner wasn't one of those folks people could count on for a longer time. If they did they would be cheated, so unreliable he was.

He wasn't a young man any more, having lived well past 70 years. That it was "small potatoes" now and then for him was something folks realized, but he

wasn't the kind to complain, or even to associate with others in the usual way. And relations with others didn't improve with the passage of time. He got along better by himself, and those who knew him best kept their distance. And he had to admit that there were those who could irritate him, and they knew that it was easy for him to blow up. People can be so unthinking and find enjoyment in something that shouldn't be, perhaps more so when they are young. If they banged on the wall when they passed by his cabin late at night, it wasn't long before he stood at the crack of the door, armed with an axe, and let go with a volley of the coarsest language. But by then they were all a fair distance away, and could stand there and enjoy themselves, ready to run if he decided to come out. They knew all too well that they were fleeter of foot than he. Gunner well knew the same thing. He had stiff knees, and could go only so far, and he had only the axe and his mouth to threaten with, while he stood there and stamped up and down.

Anton Hogberg was 11 years old, really a good and well-behaved boy, about whom no one ever heard anything out of the way. He himself couldn't explain how recklessly and badly he had acted that one time. The words he regretted so bitterly had slipped from his lips so utterly thoughtlessly.

The winter was good, even though it began early that year. Even in November the skiing was good and the snow wasn't meant to be left untracked.

Anton Hogberg and Jon Tiege were often together. They were neighbors and the same age. So one time they had been up on the home *seter* [mountain pasture] a couple weeks before Christmas, and were coming home by way of Korphaugen. They had given no thought to Gunner when something went wrong with a ski binding. So they stood there next to the cabin wall, and were going to mend the broken binding. Then it happened that Anton, completely inadvertently, peeked through one of the dirty windows. And right away there was a stir inside, and out came Gunner in a rush. He began to call them names of the vilest possible sort. Couldn't a pack of gypsies let a poor fellow be in peace? They didn't answer, hadn't meant any harm, felt themselves innocent and wrongly accused. And when they had their skis on and were setting out, then it was that the terrible

words had burst forth from Anton: "You old cripple!" Gunner stood there, even more angry. Far down the hill they could still hear his vile language.

At school they had begun singing Christmas songs, among others. There was nothing like them. Familiar and loved, they are sung year after year. Old memories spring up, bringing new hope. Anticipation fills the mind with delight. If only the days would go a little faster! And in the same way, Anton rejoiced. When he sang out heartily, "How glad I am each Christmas Eve," it was as though he knew the blessed feeling only Christmas can give. But one day when they had sung that song, the teacher told them that true joy can only be known if the conscience is good. If they had done wrong by someone they must settle that first. Only then could there be true Christmas joy.

And that was the problem that Anton had carried and been plagued with for several days now, the "You old cripple!" he had so thoughtlessly hurled against Gunner Korphaugen.

What if he confided in Mother? She was so easy to talk to, and she had such a remarkable ability, Mother, to settle difficulties. If only he could bring himself to do it. But he dragged his feet and dragged his feet—all the way to Christmas Eve morning. He was hardly as glad as he should have been. Was he glad at all, taking all things into consideration? It had become worse and worse the more he thought about it. Not that he saw himself as important, either. But it seemed as if everything was at a standstill.

"Are you feeling all right, Anton?" asked Mother. He hesitated at the question, wishing to wait until Father had gone out. And then he told everything that had happened, feeling relieved when it was done.

In the light of mid-day Christmas Eve, Anton Hogberg trudged the steep hillside up toward Korphaugen. The new snow reached high up his legs. What good skiing there would be! Remarkable how quickly everything had turned for the better. He didn't realize that the walking was heavy, didn't feel either that the basket was heavy. Mother had been kind when she had heard the true story of events. Together they had planned how the matter of "the old cripple" should be made right.

And so willingly she had filled the basket with both one thing and another out of all the good things they themselves would have for Christmas. But the Christmas tree was Anton's own doing.

One way or another he wanted to have a Christmas tree along, if only a very small one. He had himself gone out and had selected the decorations for it. There wasn't need for many, as it wasn't very tall.

At last he reached the cabin. He stumbled in. He had never seen such a dirty house, mess and dirt all over. No preparation for Christmas was evident, none at all. But surely Gunner couldn't be far away. There was a little heat in the stove, and when he touched the dirty coffee pot he felt a little warmth.

But did he need to wait until Gunner returned? He tidied up the worst. He moved some empty cups to an empty box, found a piece of cloth and wiped the table somewhat clean, placed the tree on it, took out the decorations, and put them on. And when he had done what he could, he thought things looked pretty good.

But he thought that Gunner should know who had visited him. He searched in his pockets and found the stub of a pencil, and found a piece of paper big enough to scribble a greeting on. Soon it was there: "Forgive me for calling you an old cripple." Below that he wrote "Merry Christmas" and his name. Certainly that did something strange to his conscience. Think that a person could feel as happy as he did now!

At the bottom of the hill he met Gunner. He came limping with a dry spruce branch on his shoulder; that was likely what he planned for a tree.

Anton greeted him as they passed without saying anything, but he thought that Gunner wasn't so angry today. Was he thinking about Christmas a little bit? If so, he would have something to remember.

And in his heart Anton knew that, when evening came, he could sing the Christmas songs with more peace than ever before, because now there was no longer anything gnawing at his conscience.

Translated from the original Norwegian in Juleaften paa Landet by Pastor Raynard Huglen, Newfolden, Minn.

# A sincere hunger for God's Word

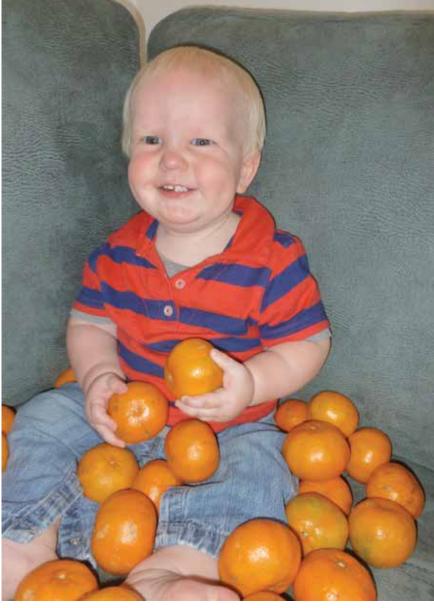
BY JUSTO PILLMAN

ate last June, our family moved to Ecuador to begin missionary service with AFLC World Missions. Moving to a new country means lots of changes. There are so many new sights to see, new foods to eat, and new friends to make. Some things take some getting used to, and others are really enjoyable right from the start.

When we arrived in Ecuador our son, Nathanael, was just getting old enough to begin tasting different foods. Each Thursday we take him to the open market and buy our fruits and vegetables for the week. He is always a favorite with the different ladies at the fruit stands. One day after getting home from the market we decided to see if Nathanael would like a piece of mandarin orange. Much to our surprise, he liked the new taste and very soon they became one of his favorite foods.

While we are glad Nathanael enjoys such a healthy snack, it soon began causing other complications. The moment he catches a glimpse of a mandarin on the table he loses all interest in any of the other food we are feeding him. All he can think about is getting his chubby little hands on those brightly colored mandarins. Nathanael's love for mandarin oranges teaches us a good lesson about missions and discipleship.

We are so thankful for the faithful communication of friends and churches from back home and very often are asked for prayer requests. While there are many things we could mention, one of the biggest needs we see is a sincere hunger for the Word of God amongst the people we work with and disciple. More specifically, our prayer is that they would desire the Word of God just like Nathanael desires the mandarin oranges. In I Peter 2:2 we read, "as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby ..." Newborn babies will never grow unless they eat, and spiritually it is the same. The only way new believers will be able to grow and mature is if they are in the Word of God. Our prayer is that the people we work with would have a love for the Word of God and the desire and grace to faithfully read and hear the Word.



Not only does Nathanael desire the mandarins, but he also rejects every other food. Similarly, not only do we pray for a hunger for the Word, but we also pray that those we serve would reject lies. The world bombards us every day with every sort of deception, and only as each knows the truth of God's Word will he be able to reject what is untrue. Paul said it so well in his second letter to the Corinthians, "But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (11:3).

There are many prayer needs on the mission field, but as you remember the ministry here in Ecuador and the work the Lord is doing in other places, don't forget the importance of the Word of God in the lives of the people we serve. Pray that they would be faithful to reject untruth and always read, study, and hold fast to the truth of God's Word.

Pillman and his wife, Patricia, are AFLC missionaries serving in Cuenca, Ecuador, with their son, Nathanael.

## A Christmas lesson

BY MONICA COYLE

hat is it that truly makes Christmas "Christmas"? As Christians, we have a wonderful opportunity to share the gospel with those around us as we live out the answer to this question. Christmas is not just a happy holiday we look forward to celebrating, complete with a perfectly decorated home and plenty of gifts under the tree. There are great traditions that have a special place in our homes and families, but these things do not define Christmas.

As a mother, I have been able to share with my children the answer to this question. In the process, I have been challenged to ask myself why exactly we do things the way we do at Christmastime. Building family traditions that point our children to the Savior and teaching them to discern the truth amid the many entertaining distractions of the holiday was becoming a faithbuilding venture in my life. Yet, somehow, I was still unprepared for the test ahead.

It was last December, our first Christmas in Ukraine, and the long awaited boxes had still not arrived. More than a month late, these boxes held our Advent candles, the children's Christmas books, tree decorations, the stockings, and more. Normally, it might not have seemed so important. But this was our first Christmas in a different country, not to mention a culture void of the commercial hype typical of our American experiences.

Through these weeks of waiting, the Lord was helping me confront some idols in my heart that, until then, I didn't realize existed. Could Christmas really feel like Christmas without our extended family gathered around? Without the Advent celebrations with the familiar community of believers whom we missed? Without familiar hymns, Christmas songs on the radio, and the usual calendar full of Christmas events? And what about those missing boxes?

The Lord was helping me see that the beauty of Christmas—God's overwhelming love for the world—could not be diminished by feelings. His love for the world is just as strong now as it was so long ago. The fact of His great love for us and His great sacrifice on our behalf is not dependent on how I feel. He loves every nation and every people group, regardless of how His love is received. He loved even me, and His presence with me is undeniable.



Pastor Andy and Monica Coyle and their children, Moriah, Isaiah and Josiah, are AFLC missionaries on loan to the East European Mission Network in Ukraine.

That first Christmas we learned more about the Ukrainian culture and how Christmas is celebrated here. The Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas one week later than the Lutheran church, according to the Eastern calendar. The New Year's celebration is the dominant holiday, with Father Frost in the spotlight, much like his Western counterpart, Santa Claus. It was in this cultural context that we had, and continue to have, the opportunity to share the gospel.

As Christmas neared, the Lord showed me that we could still celebrate as a family and teach our children without those boxes. After all, being flexible is a basic rule for missionaries! Soon after, just a week before Christmas, our boxes were released from customs control and were delivered to our door. I was very grateful for them, but even more grateful for what the Lord taught me.

May you be encouraged this Christmas as you celebrate the Savior's love for you and His presence with you. In all situations, may we by God's grace delight in the Lord's great love for us, and for the whole world. In whichever culture we find ourselves, may we by God's grace shine the gospel light through our lives.

Coyle and her husband, Pastor Andy Coyle, serve as AFLC missionaries in Odessa, Ukraine.

#### **AFLC memorials: October**

#### **AFLBS**

Wilma Batterman Pastor Laurel Udden Herb & Dorothy Presteng Ruby Holm Ruth Claus

#### **AFLTS**

Norman Fink
Wilma Batterman
Pastor Luther Strommen (2)
Pastor Laurel Udden
CeCe Holter
LuLu Mae Wilkin
Paul Hansen (2)
Ruby Holm

#### **All departments** Lester Lalim

**Ambassador Institute** Ruth Perin

#### **Evangelism**

Doris Quist Joel Formo

#### **FLAPS**

Harvey Hoops

#### **Home Missions**

Duane Kinnoin Ione Gunness Louise Haarstad

#### **World Missions**

Clifford Johnson Duane Kinnoin

... in honor of

#### **Anniversary Project**

Pastor Steve & Angela Lombardo

#### **World Missions**

Pastor Del & Karen Palmer

# Partar Dannis Narhy (frant cantar) was installed Sant as at Hone Lytharan

Pastor Dennis Norby (front center) was installed Sept. 30 at Hope Lutheran, Enderlin, N.D., with AFLC Home Missions Director Pastor Paul Nash (front left) officiating.

#### Olson travels to Ecuador for Ambassador Institute training

Pastor Kevin Olson traveled to Cuenca, Ecuador, during the first two weeks of November. The Ambassador Institute was invited to Ecuador to introduce the Paz de Dios congregation to the oral style of education. Their congregation has eight cell groups that are going to use the oral style of training as they study the sermon text for each week. Pastor Santiago Gomezcoello, Pastor Darwin Paccha and missionary Justo Pillman are encouraging their congregation to dig deeply into God's Word. This tool helps cell leaders study the text in a new way.

#### Christian Free Lutheran celebrates 25 years

Members of Christian Free Lutheran Church in Wheatland, Iowa, will celebrate the congregation's 25th anniversary Jan. 3-6, 2013, with special meetings. Speakers will be Pastors Tim Carlson, Jim Ritter, Keith Quanbeck, David Nelson, and Elden Nelson. Christian Free Lutheran is served by Pastor Eric Swenson.

#### **Lutherans For Life seeks RFL director**

Lutherans For Life, headquartered in Nevada, Iowa, is seeking a Renewal For Life (RFL) Director. Renewal For Life, in cooperation with local pastors, seeks to identify and develop Life Teams and Life Team Leaders within congregations across the country. These Life Teams will educate members about all issues related to the value of life from conception to natural death. The director will manage all aspects of RFL including recruiting, training, marketing and supervising. For more information, contact Lutherans For Life at 888.364.LIFE or info@lutheransforlife.org.

#### **People and Places**

The funeral service for **Ruby J. Holm**, 83, Greenbush, Minn., was held at Rose Free Lutheran Church, rural Roseau, on Oct. 29. For several years Ruby taught English at the AFLC Bible school. Her husband, Cliff, was employed on the campus in both maintenance and food services. Blessed be her memory.

A funeral service for **Clifford Johnson**, 88, was held Sept. 20 in St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Cloquet, Minn., where he was a long-time member. Johnson was also the lay pastor for several congregations, including St. John's, Finlayson, Minn., and served on the AFLC Coordinating Committee. Blessed be his memory.

**Peter Burton**, 60, former part-time Greek and Hebrew instructor for the AFLC Seminary, died Oct. 5 from complications of ALS. He was married to the former Louise Udden, daughter of Pastor Laurel and Joan Udden, who served for several years as AFLC Schools librarian. Blessed be his memory.

### Yet Christmas here can find me

t was Christmas Eve 1805. Hans Nielsen Hauge, the Norwegian lay evangelist, had been jailed for the final time, an imprisonment that would last for ten years. Friends traveled a long way to see him, but the prison door was shut to them, and they were denied entrance. A.M. Arntzen's book, *The Apostle of Norway*, recounts the story in novel form of what occurred that night (pp. 252-257).

Hauge took the candle that provided light in his cell and raised it up to the barred window so that his friends outside could see it. Then he took the candle down,



Pastor Robert Lee

trimmed the wick, and raised it again to shine more brightly. The message was clear: The light still shines, and the suffering that the trimming of the wick pictured only makes it shine brighter.

There is one hymn by Hauge in the *Ambassador Hymnal* (494), written years after his release from the unjust imprisonment. It is included in the section entitled "Following Christ," and the first verse closes with these words:

Though they in chains may bind me Inside this prison cell, Yet Christmas here can find me; Within my heart 'tis well.

Perhaps some of our readers may need to sing this hymn during the days of Christmas. Some have said farewell to dear ones during the past months, and there will be a painful empty place in your homes during the holiday celebrations. Others face serious health issues, financial fears, loneliness or rejection. The joyful sounds of the season find no echoes in your heart, and you wish it would soon be over.

But Hauge learned that Christmas could still find him, in spite of his discouraging circumstances ... even in a prison cell! For "within my heart 'tis well," he recalled when writing the words to the hymn. For Christmas is more than cherished traditions, more than happy celebrations with loved ones. The heart of

is a matter of the heart, which finds us even in the midst of the darkest hours. The light still shines, even when it is trimmed, and a trimmed light is en-

Christmas

abled to shine with still greater radiance.

Our spirits may rebel against the circumstances that darken our days. "It's not fair!" we murmur and complain. It might be well for us to remember Hauge, who was not jailed for any crime except preaching and teaching the Word of God as a layman, a prisoner for the sake of Christ whose strength was sapped and whose health was broken during the long years awaiting the case to be tried and settled.

Christmas still found him. So you and I can learn the same lesson, and it can be well within our hearts, too. Here are some modest suggestions:

Listen to Christmas music, especially the carols that are familiar to you. Sing along with them, even if your "joyful noise" is more in the "noise" category.

If your congregation has Advent services, don't miss them. Come prayerful and hopeful. Remember that hope is expecting to receive something ... or Someone.

Attend a Christmas concert or two,

and a Sunday school program, even if you don't have any children or grandchildren in it. You won't be sorry.

Read the Christmas Gospel accounts in Matthew and Luke, asking God for the heart of a child to receive His words gladly.

Perform a random act of kindness that will surprise someone. Give a gift.

The heart of Christmas

heart, which finds us

even in the midst of

the darkest hours.

is a matter of the

Write a check. Remember someone who might be lonely during the holidays, for God comforts you to be able to comfort others (II Corinthians 1:3-5). Connect with others.

Open

every card and receive, and pray for the

greeting that you receive, and pray for the ones who sent them to you. Practice gratitude that you are remembered.

Decorate your home, trim a tree, even if you are alone, and thank God (even through tears) for the good memories that these things bring.

What would you add to the list? (I was going to suggest attending a lutefisk supper, too, but apparently this is not everyone's idea of comfort food.)

Most of all, remember Jesus Christ, reflect on the Word that clearly proclaims who He is and what He has done. Christmas is the special time of year when we can hardly escape being reminded of God's great love for us in Jesus, His only begotten Son. The Babe of Bethlehem is the Christ of Calvary. Worship Him.

Yes, the light still shines. Let your light shine, too, as Christmas finds you once more.

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

**Periodicals** 

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#### something to share

# More annual conference history

BY PASTOR RAYNARD HUGLEN

n my first article on the conferences (printed in September), Fargo, N.D., was inadvertently left out of the list of cities where Lutheran Free Church annual conferences were held. The conferences met there more than once. And a little known fact is that it was in Fargo in 1896 that the Friends of Augsburg chose a committee of five to draw up rules for work for a Norwegian Lutheran Free Church. Georg Sverdrup and Sven Oftedal were among the five, and were no doubt dominant in the writing of our *Guiding Principles*.

I wrote last time that Ferndale, Wash., wasn't the last site on the West Coast for one of our conferences. Since then conference have been held at Warm Beach (Silvana), Wash., at ten-year intervals, beginning in 1986. Located on the shores of Puget Sound, it is one of our most beautiful locations.

Vying for that distinction was the 1979 conference at Whitefish, Mont., where from the dining room of the Big Mountain ski resort one might see a bear crossing the mountainside. And it was there that the purchase of the Osceola, Wis., radar base was voted on. That property was later named the Association Retreat Center.

Five conferences have since been held at the ARC, as will the 2013 conference. The first conferences there will be remembered for the coziness of that small auditorium. Intimate could be the word.

When the AFLC began in 1962-63, who could have foreseen the day would come when conferences would be held in places such as Hancock, Mich., DeKalb, Ill., El Campo, Texas (the one I missed), and Oklahoma City? Or even Brookings and Sioux Falls, S.D.? Little was our faith, or am I speaking only of myself?

Also having hosted conferences are the Minnesota communi-

ties of Bloomington, Red Wing and Fergus Falls and in the North Dakota communities of Williston, Minot and Dickinson.

Audience singing is always good at annual conferences, but somehow, for me, it reached the zenith at the Women's Missionary Federation service in beautiful First Lutheran's sanctuary in Oklahoma City.

The years in which new presidents are elected create most interest in conferences. Reelections are almost a given, as with Pastor John Strand in 1963, Pastor Richard Snipstead in 1978, Pastor Robert L. Lee in 1992, and Pastor Elden Nelson in 2007. Next year we will choose a replacement for Pastor Nelson, who is retiring.

The conferences have been marked by unity of spirit and purpose for the most part, as they should be. An exception was in 1994 in Valley City, N.D., when the subject of prevenient grace was a topic of contention. There was strenuous debate. The upshot was that some pastors and lay people left the fellowship and no longer walked with us. It was reminiscent of the dispute between Paul and Barnabas concerning the younger Mark. The day came when Paul could appreciate Mark and call him a fellow worker. Perhaps the differences between us weren't really that great. But at the time the gap, even among Christians, couldn't be bridged.

One could always wish that more congregations were represented at each conference and it is a goal for which we should strive. The fellowship is sweet and the work about which we gather is the Lord's.

Huglen, founding editor of The Lutheran Ambassador, lives in Newfolden, Minn.