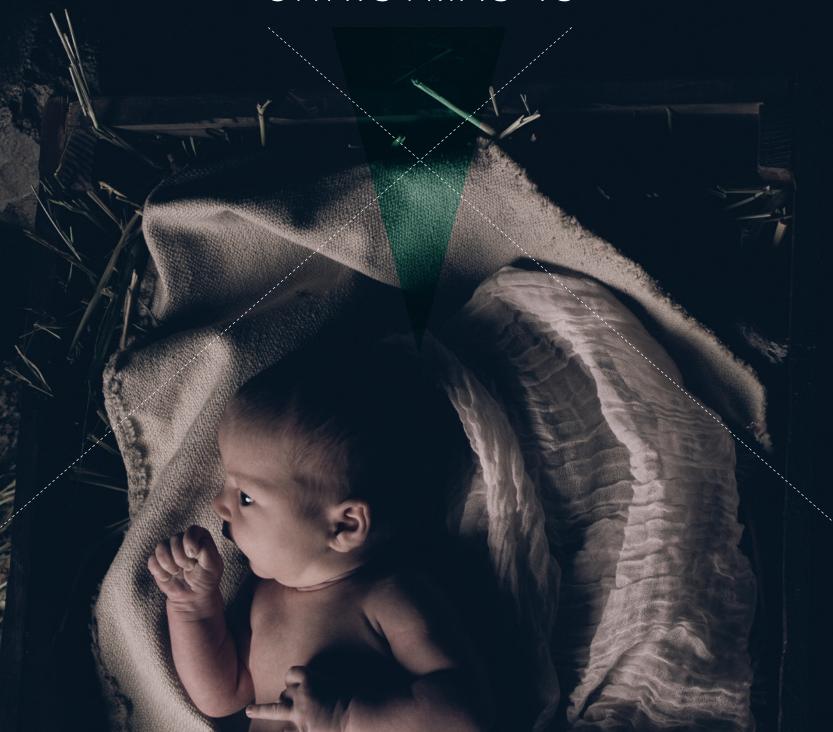
THE LUTHERAND DECEMBER 2014 AMBASSADOR

WHAT CHRISTMAS IS



God will provide

BY ANDREW KNEELAND

he prosecuting attorney is smugly confident. This is his easiest verdict yet. He has presented irrefutable evidence, the judge is just and fair, and there is nothing the defendant can do to escape certain judgment.

For the defendant, the situation seems hopeless.

Abraham probably felt even more hopeless on Mount Moriah in the story we read in Genesis 22. His wife, Sarah, had finally given birth to a son, Isaac, and he was finally seeing the fulfillment of some of God's lofty promises. Abraham's descendants would be "more numerous than the stars in the

sky" (Genesis 22:17), and "through Isaac will your descendants be named" (Genesis 21:12).

Isaac, a miracle baby, would be the father of many children, which made God's request to sacrifice him on Mount Moriah even harder for the new father to wrap his head around. Can you imagine how Abraham's heart must have broken in two?

But at the climax of the story, with Abraham clearly showing his devotion to God and with tears probably streaming down his face, God provided a substitute.

Jehovah Jireh is what Abraham named that place, which means "The Lord Will Provide." Believe it or not, this wasn't the last time God would provide a substitute on this spot. Mount Moriah was where Jerusalem was founded. The same place Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice is exactly where another



Father offered His only Son as a sacrifice.

Years after Abraham and Isaac, on Mount Moriah—which was now called Jerusalem—another Son was promised that He would be a blessing to the entire world. His Father allowed people to put wood on His back and lead Him up a hill to a place where they put Him to death.

This was Jesus. He was the new and better Isaac, doing what Isaac had done, but doing it better—once and for all. There was no ram caught in the thicket to be a substitute for Jesus. He was the substitute. He died once for the benefit of everyone, and He came back to life to defeat sin and death once and for all.

I'm so thankful that we have a God who provides.

Back in our courtroom, each one of us is the defendant, sitting before a noble and just Judge who must punish wrongdoing. The Judge's arm is in the air, about to hammer the gavel that will seal our fate and send us to an execution. But wait! God provides a substitute.

Jesus walks into the courtroom and says, "Judge, this person has done many bad things. He is guilty. But I love him. I am going to take his guilty verdict instead, so that he can go free."

Just as the ram was the substitute for Abraham in order to fulfill the promise, Jesus is our substitute. And because He died, we can live.

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I am no longer amazed that heaven, earth, sea, and all that is in them were made by God for us because God Himself ordained to become a man for the sake of His human creatures.

—Johann Gerhard

And when we give each other Christmas gifts in His name, let us remember that He has given us the sun and the moon and the stars, and the earth with its forests and mountains and oceans—and all that lives and move upon them. He has given us all green things and everything that blossoms and bears fruit and all that we quarrel about and all that we have misused—and to save us from our foolishness, from all our sins, He came down to earth and gave us Himself.

—Sigrid Undset

"The Word became flesh," wrote John, "and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). That is what incarnation means. It is untheological. It is unsophisticated. It is undignified. But according to Christianity it is the way things are. ... One of the blunders religious people are particularly fond of making is the attempt to be more spiritual than God.

—Frederick Buechner

Christmas is built upon a beautiful and intentional paradox; that the birth of the homeless should be celebrated in every home.

—G.K. Chesterson

DOCTRINAL



THE LIFE APPEARED

by pastor greg schram

hilip Melanchthon (Luther's right-hand man) once said, "To know Christ is not to speculate about the mode of His Incarnation, but to know His saving benefits."

I get what the reformer was trying to say—that at the end of the day what's important is that we know Jesus as our personal Savior. But don't the two go hand-inhand? Are not the saving benefits of Christ contingent upon His mode of Incarnation? After all, could Jesus truly be the Savior if He were not true God and true man?

We find ourselves in the season of Advent. Advent means "coming." Among other things, the season is a time to reflect upon the coming Savior. It's difficult, if not impossible, to (biblically) reflect upon the advent of Christ apart from speculating about why, and especially how it was that He came to earth.

The word incarnate comes from the Latin, meaning "embodied in flesh" or "becoming flesh." As it pertains to Christian belief, the Incarnation refers to the eternal logos (the Word, i.e. God) becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:1, 14; Philippians 2:5-11; Galatians 4:4).

In speculating about the mode of Christ's Incarnation we learn two things. We learn first of all something about our desperate need. We need saving. The testimony of Scripture is that we are all sinners (Romans 3:9-12, 23), the consequence of which is death (Romans 5:12; 6:23a), eternal separation from God in hell. Psalm 49:7-9 tells us that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. Thus, we need saving.

From the Incarnation we also learn of God's gracious provision. God embodied Himself in human flesh and came to earth in order to do for us what we were unable to do for ourselves. You've heard it said, "If you want a job done right, do it yourself."

This is essentially what the doctrine of the Incarnation is all about.

The holiness of God demands that His law be fulfilled and that transgressors of His law be punished with death. Since sinful man could do neither to the satisfaction of a Holy God, God became man to accomplish both for us, which translates into His saving benefits.

The Incarnation teaches us that the divine became human. Jesus is both true God (conceived of the Holy Spirit, Matthew 1:20) and true man (born of the Virgin Mary, Luke 1:26-31). Paul tells us that in Jesus the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily (Colossians 2:9).

But why was the Incarnation necessary? Why was it important that to be the Savior, Jesus be both human and divine? God's holiness and justice required it. The law needed to be fulfilled, and transgressors of it be punished. The only way this could be accomplished to the satisfaction of a just and holy God would be for the Father to send His Son to fulfill the law for our sake and to suffer in our place, as our substitute the punishment for transgressing it. "God put forward [His own Son] as a propitiation by his blood" (Romans 3:25). Propitiation means "to appease" or "to satisfy."

Iesus needed to be true God and true man to fulfill the law for our sake. He needed to be human in order to fulfill the law required of us humans. But He also needed to be divine in order to fulfill the law perfectly, being tempted as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Thus, God became man to fulfill the law on our behalf and for our sake (Matthew 5:17).

The Incarnation was also necessary that the punishment of sin (atonement) could satisfy a just and holy God. The only payment which would appease the wrath of God would be a perfect sacrifice. Because Jesus was without sin (thanks to His divinity) only He could satisfy God and appease His wrath by offering Himself as the perfect substitute for the punishment of sinful man, once for all (Hebrews 9:26). This is what Paul meant in Romans 3, when he spoke of Christ being set forth by the Father as a propitiation.

The Incarnation enabled God to make the only provision possible for our salvation.

Yes, the mode of the Incarnation cuts to the heart of Christ's saving benefits, for it

"This we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared ..." (I John 1:3).

> tells us of our desperate need and of God's gracious provision. For if Jesus were only God or only man, and not simultaneously both, or neither, He could not have been the Savior. And if not the Savior, then we would still be lost in our sin.

Throughout the Advent season, go ahead and speculate about the mode of Christ's Incarnation. And may such speculation cause you to truly know (not just assent with the mind, but trust with the heart) Christ's saving benefits for you.

Schram serves Our Saviour's Lutheran, Thief River Falls, Minn., and Reiner Lutheran, Goodridge, Minn.

by pastor jason gudim

nasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4, ESV).

And so Dr. Luke opens his Gospel, a two-part history of Jesus Christ and the early Church, dedicated to his friend

"The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it ..." (I John 1:2).

Theophilus. What is so interesting about this preamble is that the history of the events surrounding the life of Christ has been recorded for the sake of making certain the faith in which Theophilus has been instructed.

The notion of certainty through reality permeates our entire Christian faith. The Apostle Paul attributes the validity of the gospel to its historicity in I Corinthians 15. As he opens the chapter, he writes, "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand." From there he lists the events—historical events—from Jesus' life: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the

third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve" (vs. 3-5). He even goes as far as to write that if the resurrection of Christ isn't a reality, "your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (v. 17).

The very things that form and define our faith are real, historical things. Jesus actually fulfilled the law of God perfectly. Jesus actually was arrested, tried, beaten, and crucified. Jesus actually rose from the grave. This is no less true of Christmas. It all started when Jesus was actually born of a virgin in a stable in the city of Bethlehem.

It almost seems silly to talk about Christianity in this way. It's so obvious it should go without saying. And yet the very moment it goes without saying is when our rock-solid, certain faith is subjected to doubt, misinter-pretation, and abuse.

And so we must return to the historicity of our faith, continually. It all starts with a baby, wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

In Galatians 4:4-5 we read, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Our faith, our identities as children of God, and our redemption all flow from the fact that God sent forth His Son. God Himself steps into human history for the purpose of redeeming sinful humans like you and me.

But even beyond this, the phrase "the fullness of time" carries an even deeper sense of the historicity of the gospel. What Paul is writing here to the churches in Galatia is that God sent forth his Son at *just the right time*. Not only is the gospel historical, but it is the culmination of history.

From the beginning, from Adam and

Eve falling to the serpent's temptation in the Garden of Eden, God was directing human history for the purpose of sending our Redeemer. God announced to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel," (Genesis 3:15). The offspring of the woman is Jesus Christ, who defeated our enemies of sin, death, and the devil on the cross.

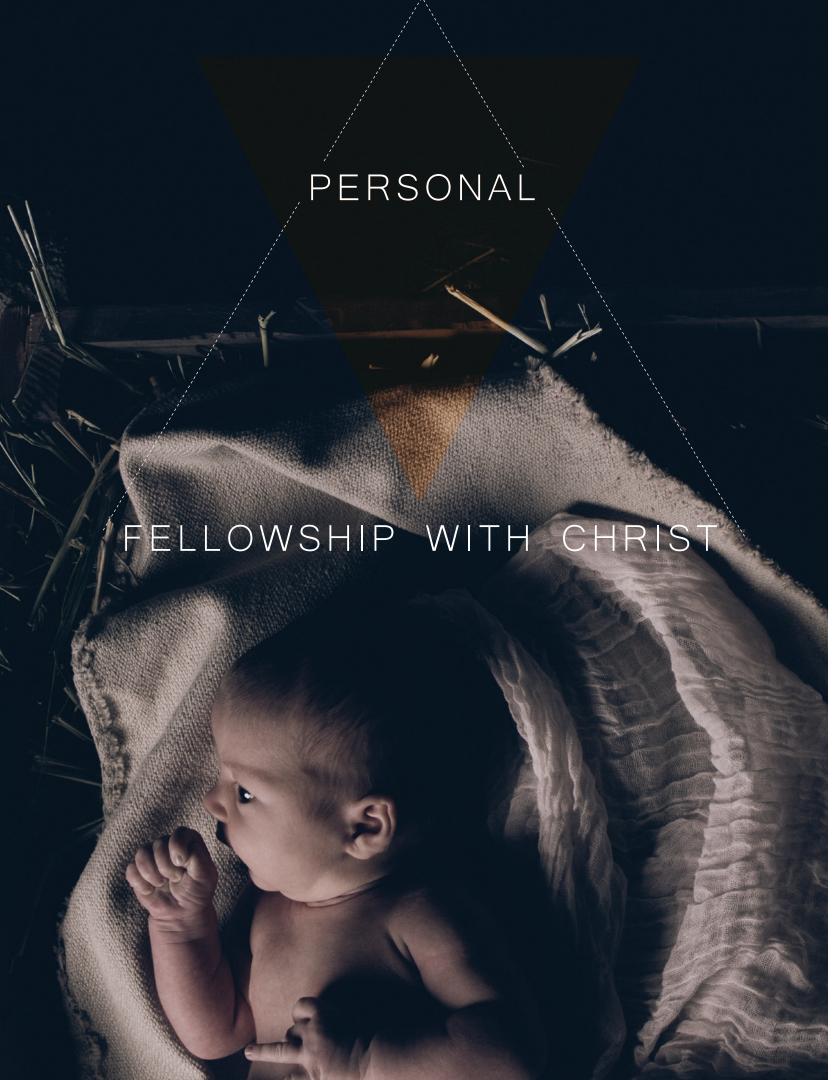
From that point on, God constantly worked through history to bring us a Savior. He preserved the people of Israel through Joseph, and then Moses, and then Queen Esther, so that Christ might be born of the line of David, as God had promised.

God directed the events of humans to point us to the cross. As He was asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham confessed, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (Genesis 22:8). And then He did, first with the ram caught in the thicket, and then ultimately through Jesus Christ. Through Moses, as He did through Christ, God was faithful to lead His people out of bondage and into the Promised Land. God demonstrates to us through David and Goliath how the victory of the one (Jesus Christ) is imputed to the many.

Through all this, God knew just the right time to send His Son into the world. And that time just happened to be at the height of the Roman Empire, during a census, in a stable in the town of Bethlehem. And that helpless little baby whose birthday we celebrate every year on December 25 is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Gudim, part-time faculty at the AFLC Schools, serves Faith Free Lutheran, Minneapolis.

HISTORIC WE HAVE SEEN IT



by renah thompson

ook: the extraordinary, the beautiful, mystery. God became not just "man" in an abstract understandable sense, but *a* man. Became one particular squalling baby, in one particular smelly cave in one shabby village in a rebellious, obscure, enemy-occupied country. I've been struggling to find adequate words to capture it—the light dawning tiny in darkness, this astonishment—and there are none.

He came. Desire of the nations, long-expected and longed for through exile and wandering and countless years of bloody sacrifice, He came in humility and graciousness. The prophecies about Him are so beautiful that sometimes I can hardly read them. A child born, darkness lifted, a Messiah promised—and a promise kept. He came

And here is the crux of the mystery: this coming continues in our individual time-bound lives. He didn't come once (a glorious flash!) and then head out for a nicer neighborhood. No, He offers to continue His gracious advent in your everyday. Fellowship—even friendship!—with God is open to you. In Advent, "we prepare to witness ... the Mystery, the God made flesh ... He cannot be comprehended, but he can be touched" (Scott Cairns, in God with Us). In Incarnation, the Word is flesh. God is for us. God is with us. "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (I John 1:3).

Now, in certain circles (ahem), the word fellowship means that after the service, everybody will head to the church basement for a potluck. While I have no objections to a good cheesy-potato hot dish, the assumed definition of fellowship as "better-than-ordinary friendship and generally having a nice time" lends a seriously skewed idea about what fellowship with God actually means. First, remember: you are fallen, naturally God's enemy. Any interaction with Him that doesn't involve your death is an incredible turn-around. (Imagine the leaders of militant Islam suddenly being

offered coffee and a golf game or two with the President.) It is only because of God with us and for us that friendship with Him is an available concept—let alone our lived reality.

In all of our talk about a "personal relationship with Jesus," what we're really saying is that Jesus has come in grace to make us His fellows, His friends. That identification with Him and with His death becomes both our shield from wrath and the working out of our salvation. If "our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ," then we no longer have anything to fear. Our enemy can now reveal Himself as the lover of our souls.

This is a love not easily borne. "To ask that God's love should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God ... because He already loves us He must labour to make us lovable" (C.S. Lewis). How else should this revolution take place but through deepening friendship with Jesus? Dallas Willard, in The Divine Conspiracy, speaks about learning from Jesus as one learning from a master craftsman. We become apprentices of Jesus, imitating Him and practicing His way of living, and confidently relying on His presence and power to accomplish that change in us. In prayer, in spiritual disciplines like service or solitude, in obedience—these are the ways we live out our friendship with Him. "In his presence our inner life will be transformed, and we will become the kind of people for whom his course of action is the natural ... course of action." Your longing, your hunger and thirst for a good and true way of living in communion with God—it can be satisfied. God is with us and for us-not only as atoning sacrifice but as our teacher and refiner, as the friend who trains us in righteousness.

This fellowship with God isn't a mystic metaphysical thing, some feeling or "relationship" that shimmers out of sight when you look at it straight on. It's made real and concrete by the incarnation; almost rudely human proof that God is for us and

with us. In some sense, we get to watch His autobiography as He tells us about Himself through parables and miracles and His everyday life. His Spirit—our Counselor—is here, pointing us always back to him, deepening our desire for this relationship. Then, of course, consider the great treasure of the Word and Sacraments. Here in the heft and weight of your Bible, here in the sour bite of cheap wine, here in the cold water death and life of baptism—here is your communing with Him, deeper than any common definition of friendship. These are gifts; He has not left us. The One who comforts is here, and that crumbly wafer is a strange and fitting proclamation of His presence.

Listen: "We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete" (I John 1:4). This is John the disciple speaking—the one

"And our fellowship is with the Father and with his son, Jesus Christ" (I John 1:3).

who knew Jesus, who leaned against Him at a Passover supper and watched Him betrayed. He, if anyone, should know—in fellowship with *this* man, fully God, fully human, we are offered true life and the fullest wild and precious joy. Because of Emmanuel, God with us, you are made not only God's friend but His child and a part of His body. One with Him. Now *there's* a mystery.

Thompson grew up in Janesville, Wis., and recently moved to Kalispell, Mont., where she attends Faith Free Lutheran. Author's note: For a far more in-depth discussion of Jesus' life as autobiography, see Dorothy Sayers' The Mind of the Maker. Dallas Willard's The Divine Conspiracy is also an excellent read regarding discipleship, spiritual disciplines, and the Kingdom of God.

by pastor ken moland

y younger sister, Diane, died of complications of breast cancer on December 22, now quite a few years ago. Those who have experienced such losses around Christmastime perhaps have heard this comment, made to our mother, "It's so hard when it happens close to Christmas." Our mother acknowledged the loving gift of sympathy and was given grace to respond, "Yes, but think of how hard it would be if there were no Christmas." In our grief we were reminded that "[Christ] came among

"That which ... we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched" (I John 1:1).

us at Christmastide" and that His light invaded our darkness and our darkness did not extinguish His Light.

The message of the Incarnation, the eternal Son of God coming in the flesh, is earthy, even gritty, with boots on the ground and perhaps even mired in the mud of human existence.

Jesus didn't maintain and communicate His righteousness by remaining aloof from this world's needs, but rather through full engagement, in the stable and on the cross. In this sense, then, while Christmas is not to be materialistic, Christmas is material as contrasted to ethereal. This encounter with

humanity was not a lifeless drone operated by a computer in the sky, but rather a personal emissary in the form of flesh and blood, a baby in a manger. It was this One about whom John wrote, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory" (John 1:14), and later, "... what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life" (I John 1:1b). The message of Christmas intersects with the real world to bring about radical change as the light dispels the darkness.

The Apostle John considered this truth about the Incarnation so important that he

lists it as a qualifier for true doctrine in I John 4:2. The emerging heresy of the Gnostics was preempted by the testimony of this lone-surviving disciple who had witnessed the majesty and the meaning of "God in the flesh." This humble fisherman had not been able to ascend up to God, but he knew the God who had descended to Him and had dwelt among fallen humanity.

How important is this truth for our Christmas celebration this year? Perhaps we can think of it this way: The message of Christmas will have more impact when we allow it to intersect more deeply at the core of

our being and at the core of the fallen world around us. A superficial celebration will not accomplish this, so we need to plan for a radical invasion of the light of the gospel.

On a personal level, we don't need to be afraid to bring our stuff, our grief, our heartaches, or our loneliness to the Christmas party. We won't spoil the party and the party of Christ's coming just might invade our world of need. Furthermore, as we welcome Christ to come and dwell with us personally, He comes. Amazingly, He takes up residence in the humble, oftentimes unkempt, human heart and causes His blessings to flow far as the curse is

found! This is among the great blessings of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has entered, and still enters our lives in spite of our brokenness and our uncleanness.

The glory of the Incarnation also goes through us and beyond us to bring life to incarnational ministry. The follower of Christ whose core being has been intersected by the incarnate Jesus now better understands his or her role in mission to the world. This powerful truth has inspired multitudes of caring ministries to bring hands-on help and hope to those in need.

An experience in hospital chaplaincy brought the point to a focus for me. I was doing general visits on a unit and stopped at the nurse's station with my usual inquiry of the staff to let them guide me to needs among their patients.

One of the nurses responded, "There is a really nice lady in the corner room. I'm sure she would welcome a visit."

I paused and then said, "I'm happy to visit her, but I am also here to visit those who aren't nice—the broken, the angry, the hopeless and the cantankerous."

One of the privileges of chaplaincy is to bring the presence of Christ into devastating circumstances where the wounded are asking, "Where is God in the midst of all this?" Because Christ came in the flesh we can bring His presence through Word and Sacrament—and through our presence—right into the midst of our broken and unclean world. Let His blessings flow far as the curse is found!

Thank God for a radical invasion of the light of the gospel.

Moland serves Our Redeemer Lutheran, Kirkland, Wash.

¹ "Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine," traditional German hymn.

MATERIAL

OUR HANDS HAVE TOUCHED



FELLOWSHIP WITH US

by ruth carstensen

hile reminiscing at family reunions or other informal gatherings, my family and friends often like to talk about important or significant people we have met. They might be sports figures, maybe someone in politics, or a writer. It is usually a toss-up when deciding who had met the most important personage. But if we look into Scripture, we find some awesome people. The first one I would mention was Enoch. He walked with God, what a testimony. Then there are Abraham and Moses. They had such challenging lives: tests of faith that make us marvel. When we read Hebrews 11, we find a recounting of an impressive gallery of saints from the history of the Israelites.

But in the New Testament there is one glowing figure who stands out: the Apostle John. Looking into Scripture and trying to piece his life together, we learn that he was a disciple of John the Baptist. He must have been looking for the coming Messiah. He heard the Baptizer proclaim, "Behold the Lamb of God!" while pointing away from himself to Jesus of Nazareth.

So when Jesus called John to be His disciple, he was willing to follow Him.

That walk was the walk of a lifetime. What a life to have lived. Jesus said, "I have no place to lay my head," and John was willing to share in that life. From the first miracle at Cana to the crucifixion and resurrection, right up to the Ascension of Jesus, John was there.

John's understanding of who Jesus was changed over the three years he had with the Lord. In his old age he still wrote about this time. In I John 1: 1-4, the Apostle John makes the statement, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of Life: For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life,

which was with the father, and was manifested unto us; That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full."

John saw Jesus rise from the dead. He also saw Jesus command the waters and the wind; for a fisherman that must have been impressive. The Apostle John also helped feeding the masses when all they had was just the little bit at hand; Jesus made sure they had enough food to pass out until all had been satisfied.

John listened to Jesus' teaching, which was more powerful than any of his previous teachers—even John the Baptist. An early high point must have been the time on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured, and they heard a voice from heaven: "This is my beloved son. Hear him." Yes, they heard God the Father speaking to them. This must have cemented the belief that he was dealing with God, that Jesus was God in human form. These three years must have been like an earthquake in his life.

Yes, John truly had supreme bragging rights. He walked with Jesus, the Messiah. But John's opinion of Jesus must have changed as he walked with Christ: Jesus the teacher, a healer, a miracle worker, and finally, John realized that Jesus was truly God come down to earth. John had the privilege of walking with Jesus, talking with Him, facing adoring crowds and hostile temple authorities with Him. By the end of His ministry on earth, Jesus entrusted John with the care of His mother, Mary-what an

John states his reason for telling this story is that they—the early Church—may have fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. Now John really mirrors the relationship Jesus had with

His heavenly Father: always close, always transparent, always obedient, always trusting. What a glowing example for the early believers.

There is so much in these few verses for us to learn. Do we walk close to the Lord? Sadly, no—not always or not often. No wonder John compares us to sheep that wander away. But he reminds us that our Shepherd keeps searching for the lost.

Are we transparent, honest in our thoughts and intentions? Scripture declares our hearts to be desperately wicked.

What about obedience? More often we go our own way and do not ask the Lord guide us.

"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us" (I John 1:3).

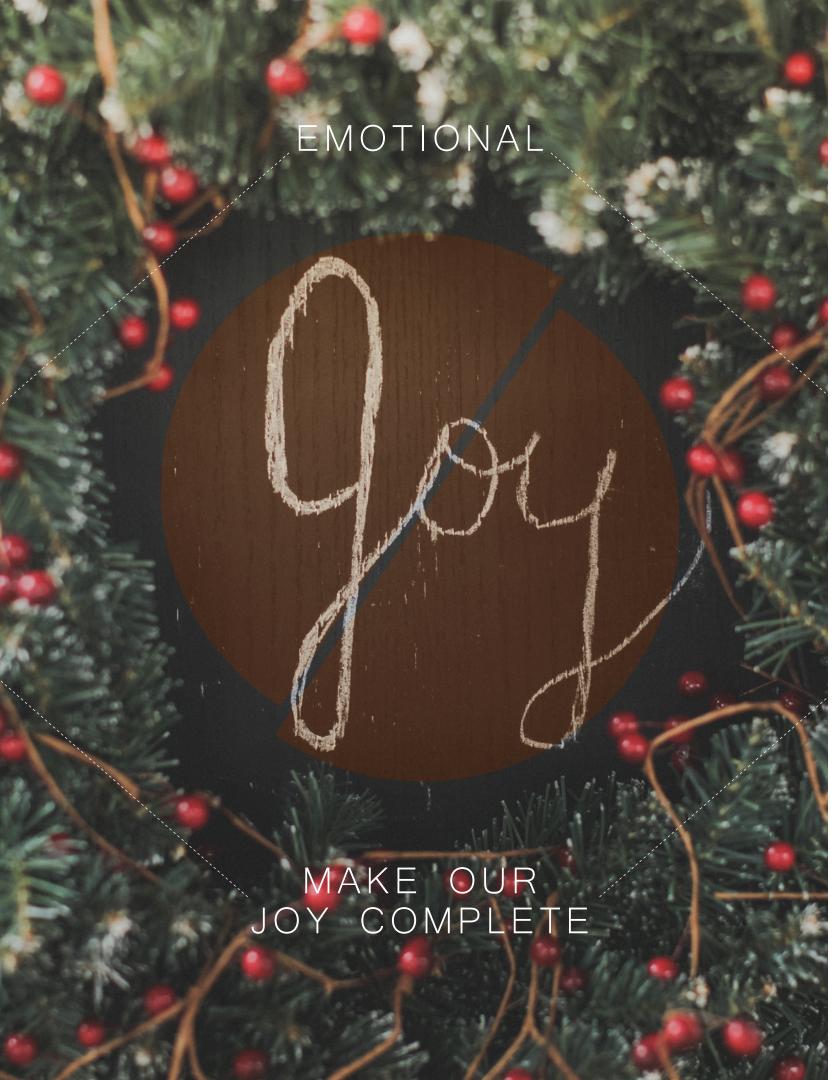
> Then there is the trust issue. How often do we have to confess: Lord I believe, help my unbelief.

So in this Christmas season we may find ourselves struggling and praying: You know me, Lord. I want to know You, too. Have mercy and send help.

I want to close with the words of Paul Gerhard, in his hymn, We Sing, Immanuel, Thy Praise:

> But I, thy servant Lord, today confess my love and truly say, I love thee truly, but I would That I might love thee as I should.

Carstensen, Byron, Minn., is a member of Mt. Sion Lutheran, Kasson, Minn.



by amy skogerboe

ow does a believer experience Christmas any differently than an unbeliever? That question ignited and gave direction to my thought process as I set out to contemplate the emotions of Christmas. As I write it is mid-October, and already the retailers of America have once again beaten the Church to the punch when it comes to declaring that Christmastime is indeed on its way! The words love, joy, peace, and hope will soon be splashed across fireplace mantles, marquees, home décor, and seasonal clothing as they are each time this holiday cycles around, closing our calendar year. And that is precisely what it does, doesn't it? Cycles around. We greet it, see it, taste it, hear it, sing it, celebrate it, and then grieve its passing ... until the next time. To everything there is a season—turn, turn, turn ...

There's a great deal of beauty in the world's festivities surrounding Christmas: spectacular light displays, breathtaking musical orchestrations, heart-stirring traditions that flood our senses with pleasure and goodwill. A Christ-less culture dances on a December stage in vibrant color and full regalia, proclaiming love for others, joy to the world, and peace to all. Believer, please don't forget. Behind that curtain is the most profound void that exists—the empty human heart, devoid of a Savior. No lights are bright enough, no memory sweet enough, no tradition poignant enough to meet the need of a soul that is lost.

Freedom! From the cry of "It is finished" on the cross to the Savior's infant cry in the cradle, the gospel obliterates humanity's attempts to find meaning in the meaningless. Salvation arrives on the stage to tell a far greater story, and our hearts encounter a cause and a King able to infuse in us our truest emotions and worthy to evoke from us our greatest praise. Luke 2 describes for us the angels crying out decrees of God's great glory and the promise of peace for His people. We are told of shepherds who heard, came, saw, worshiped, and then went to "make known that which had been told them about this Child" (vs. 17) and who "went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen" (vs. 20). We read of Mary who "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (vs. 19). These are the

honest responses to the truth of Christmas from those who believed: deep emotion and reflection, exaltation of the Father and Child, and a burning drive to share it with those who had not yet heard.

Believer, this is our Christmas. The sought-after and seasonally proclaimed

emotions of love, joy, peace, and hope have real substance, life-altering purpose, and lasting power when they originate from our Father and when His Spirit is alive in us. John 14:27 says, "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid" (New Living Translation). The God-given emotions that the story of Christmas evokes are free to find God-honoring expression in and through our lives to those who have yet to see the Light. John writes in I John 1:4 that by sharing the truths of God that had been revealed to him, his "joy may be made complete." We have been made complete in Him, and by sharing that with others there is an even greater joy to be had.

Love people well and in His name. May people be drawn to your Jesus because of His love evidenced in your life. Be defined by Christ's undeniable and sometimes inexplicable joy alive in you. May it be seen in your suffering as well as your celebration. Seek His *peace* and let it dwell deep and richly in your person. May it heal and restore you and your relationships with others. Hope miraculously in things which are not seen and be known for the living *hope* that dwells in you because you have been born again.

"We write this to make our joy complete" (I John 1:4).

How does a believer experience Christmas any differently than an unbeliever? As one who believes, experience Christmas and the truth of Christ alive in you in such a way that you are forever changed, not settling for a celebration that cycles in and out of season, but igniting with eternal Spirit-filled passion that reaches out for those who need a Savior!

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13).

Skogerboe is a member of St. Olaf Lutheran, Montgomery, Ill.

BY STORM MONSEN

A MOTHER'S FAITH

t is interesting to visit older folks on Christmas Eve. They sit in their loneliness and think about the years gone by, the times when the family was gathered and everything was so pleasant, the time when Mother prepared for her husband and children on Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve was the great festival when every family member thought of what happened that night on Bethlehem's fields when the angels came with the heavenly message from above:

"A great joy for all people!"

The elderly mother whom we visit in her loneliness is Jergine. Everything has changed for her. She had three sons and two daughters. Her husband set an example as a good worker, a good father, and a faithful husband, but also a true disciple of Jesus Christ. But his life on earth had ended some years ago, the children had grown up and were living in their own homes, and old mother Jergine sat home alone in her little room. She would soon be 87.

We stopped in to visit Jergine on Christmas Eve and greeted her with God's peace. In the stove there was a merry crackling and the light was cast into the room. All was clean and in order. On the table there stood a little flower and the Bible was opened. The word we saw there was from Luke 2: "Behold, I bring you tidings, 'A savior is born unto you."

Mother Jergine was a follower of Jesus Christ in her loneliness. All she owned and which alone had any interest for her was Jesus—and a missing son named Lars. On Christmas Eve Jergine had prepared an evening meal for two and all was ready, the table was set.

"Good evening, Mother! Are you expecting company, since you have set the table for two? How nice it looks!"

Jergine had been very busy getting ev-

erything ready. Two candles were on the table and the small lamp was lighted. She had also bought a new dome for the lamp, so everything was truly festive. She busily went back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room, and as she walked she hummed a song: "Then mother trims the Christmas tree, and fills the room with light!"

Even though Jergine was alone she had so much to do this Christmas Eve, and a gentle smile evidenced itself very quietly with a pretty glow over a wrinkled brow and furrowed cheek. We looked over at the table, which was so tastefully decorated with a fresh white table cloth, and the little flower vase had a beautiful and fragrant blossom, which reminded us more of the beautiful spring than of winter cold and darkness of evening. We wanted to know if she was waiting for company, because we knew she lived alone. We had come to invite her to be with us over Christmas. We couldn't do anything other than ask our question, did she expect company this evening?

"No, I am not going to be with you! I never go any place on Christmas Eve."

"Why, dear Jergine?"

"Sit down and I will tell you the reason."

As we sat down and let our eyes glance over the room, a wondering anticipation gripped us. The table was definitely set for two and the Bible lay open. Then she told us that she was waiting for her son, Lars, to come home.

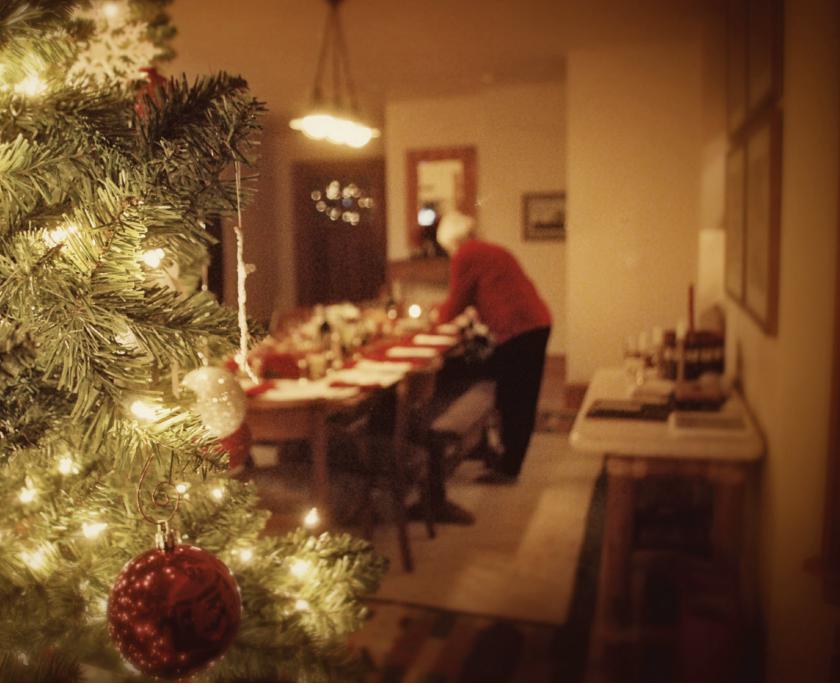
Some years earlier Jergine had prepared Christmas Eve dinner just as she had this night. She was ready to bring the food in to celebrate Christmas with Lars, who had gone out on a little errand. But she had never seen him again! He never came back. After some years had gone by she heard from one of his childhood friends that he had talked to Lars on a ship in England. Lars told him that he wanted to get home

and see his mother.

And so, since then, Jergine always set the table for two every Christmas Eve and waited for Lars. The same fork, knife, and spoon, and his dishes which were on the table that Christmas Eve when he left his home are the same ones we saw on the table that night. "And my dear son Lars will surely come again, just as certainly as he went away. And so I must be home and have everything ready and in the right place, otherwise Lars will think that his mother has forgotten him!"

That was how Jergine understood things. In all the years that had passed by since Lars disappeared, the Christmas Eve table had always stood in readiness, and Jergine had always looked out upon the road so that she could see her son when he came.

For Jergine, Christmas Eve was the holi-



est time on earth. We didn't wish to take her conviction from her, for she was certain on the matter. This evening became the closest thing to a farewell for Jergine herself, as something special was about to happen.

Before we said farewell, we sang a song and read the Christmas story together. I took Jergine's hand, squeezed it warmly, wished her a blessed Christmas Eve, and thanked her for opening her heart to us. As we left, we met a young woman who lived in the apartment above Jergine. We asked her to look in on Jergine for we thought she was strangely taken up that night. The young woman knew that Jergine was waiting for Lars, and she always said, "He is coming because I have prayed to my Heavenly Father about that!"

Early Christmas morning, someone knocked on our door. Who stood outside? It was the young woman whom we had talked with last night on the steps at Jergine's. Behind her stood a stalwart man with bowed head and a handkerchief in his hand. It was Lars!

After we had left Jergine on Christmas Eve, she sat down on the chair by the window and looked out as if there were someone she saw out there. The young woman had just then come to her and she sensed that something had changed with Jergine. She tried to get her to lie down, but she refused to do so.

"No, Lars is coming and Mother must meet him herself."

Just then there was a gentle knock at the door and Jergine stood up and went to open it. She called out and fell into the arms of the one who stepped in, "You have come, Lars!"

Lars answered, trembling, "God's peace, Mother!"

The young woman helped Lars get his mother to bed. At once sounded forth from the aged one, "Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace."

Mother Jergine lived to see her son Lars become a child of God, and now both she and her son are in glory. They praise the Lamb who brought them from earth to God with His blood.

Thus ended a Christmas Eve for a persevering and faithful mother in her 87th year. All honor and praise be to God.

Originally printed in Mjemmets Venn, and translated from Norwegian by Pastor Raynard Huglen, Newfolden, Minn.



"John answered and said, 'A man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven" (John 3:27).

ow often we witness contentions and divisions in the Lord's work among people who ask the question, "To whom does the credit belong?" The very minute we take our eyes away from Jesus, then Satan more easily gains entrance into the fellowship of Christians. John the Baptist was a tremendous preacher. His dynamic personality commanded attention. Hundreds found Christ as Savior because of his ministry. But John always directed attention away from himself to Christ alone, who alone is able to save! "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven." This is a tremendous affirmation of faith in Christ!

How good it is to know that my salvation is not dependent upon any particular church, or any particular ministry. Thank God that it is His mercy and His love that brought salvation as a free gift, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ!

Just as salvation is from heaven alone, so is our work for Him. Let us pray daily for this gift (also heaven's gift) of total personal commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Let us thank Him daily for His keeping power. Let us be thankful that all that is good, all that is love, all that is our hope for eternity, is a gift, undeserved by anyone, from heaven.

Clifford E. Johnson, now deceased, was from Esko, Minn.

Waters in the Wilderness is a daily devotional published by the AFLC Board of Parish Education in 1971 with Dr. Iver Olson, editor. All 365 meditations were contributed by AFLC members from many walks of life. "Here, they offer each a glass of cool and refreshing water each day to thirsting souls," wrote Olson in the preface. Reprinted by permission. The volume is out of print.

world missions



A reason to celebrate

BY JUSTO AND PATRICIA PILLMAN

hristmas is a big deal in here in Ecuador and will be celebrated for months surrounding Christmas. People will construct elaborate nativity scenes out of branches, moss, flowers, and lights. This is not a small production and it's not uncommon for a manger scene to be as large as a room or at least take up a corner or side of a room. In this setting there will be the figures of all the important characters from the Christmas story, but the most important figure is always the baby Jesus in the center. The figure of baby Jesus will be dressed up in elaborate clothes of silk, satin, and sequins—but the celebration doesn't stop there.

Sometime during the Christmas season, every town or neighborhood will decide on a day and together every family takes their baby Jesus in a huge parade to be blessed by the priest. The children will dress up, they will decorate horses and cars, and with their traditional Christmas music playing (along with loud fireworks), everyone celebrates the "passing of the Child." Sadly, the whole purpose of the parade, dressing up, and blessing of the figurine is so that the figure of the baby Jesus will give good luck to the family and home where it resides. Frequently, this figure will be worshiped, as well.

Many of the traditional *villancicos*, or Christmas carols, are about the poor baby Jesus, shivering in the cold. They call for ado-

ration, worship, love, and pity for this impoverished baby and His mother, but rarely do they point to the purpose of Jesus' coming to earth. Even rarer is the idea that Jesus is still relevant in their lives today.

How easy it is to forget the purpose of our Christmas celebrations. The traditions, the carols, the manger scene, the lights, and yes, for some of us, the lutefisk, can all be meaningful traditions to the Christmas season. Unfortunately, these decorations and festivities can easily overshadow the full message of Christmas. The good news of Christ's coming to this earth as a baby is worth celebrating, but it's not the whole story. The Jesus we worship isn't the figure of a baby in the manger. We don't worship the image of Jesus on the cross, either. The Jesus we worship was born and died, but now sits at the right hand of the Father. He isn't in the manger today. He isn't in the tomb, either. He is King of kings and Lord of lords and lives today in the hearts of those who will receive and believe in Him. He is just as relevant to the salvation of our souls and daily lives now as He was when He came to earth as a baby or when He hung on the cross. And this is the good news worth celebrating in every season.

The Pillmans are AFLC missionaries serving in Cuenca, Ecuador.

AFLC Home Missions opens Oasis in the Ozarks retreat

Given by anonymous donor, Oasis has seven bedrooms and 16 beds

AFLC Home Missions was recently given a home in Springfield, Mo., by an anonymous donor. Called Oasis in the Ozarks, the home will be used as a place of rest for AFLC pastors and Home Missions pastors.

The seven-bedroom, 16-bed home is located next to Immanuel Lutheran, a Home Missions congregation. Pastor Rich Ramsbacher and his wife, Kay, serve as volunteer managers of the facility and together with the congregation worked to refurbished and furnish the home with funds given by the donor.

"For the modern day pastor or missionary the demands on time and resources are much greater than days of old," said Pastor Paul Nash, director of Home Missions. "Although it's true that we have more free time, sadly those who are ministering are usually the ones that are using their free time for the service of the kingdom. For those in ministry it's important that they have a place they can go and rest and be still with the Lord. They need to have their own soul rejuvenated, their marriages built up, and their families need quality time together. The vision for the Oasis in the Ozarks is to provide a place of refuge and rest for God's people so they can return back to their place of service rejuvenated, recharged, rested, and recommitted."

For more information on the Oasis in the Ozarks, contact the Ramsbachers at ramsbacher@gmail.com.











AFLC Schools granted Candidacy Status of accreditation

The Association Free Lutheran Theological Seminary and Bible School gained Candidacy Status of accreditation with the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and School (TRACS) on Oct. 21. The TRACS Accreditation Commission voted to grant the AFLC Schools Candidate Status as a Category III educational institution, approved to offer the Diploma in General Bible and the graduate degrees of Graduate in Theology (GTh) and Master of Divinity (MDiv).

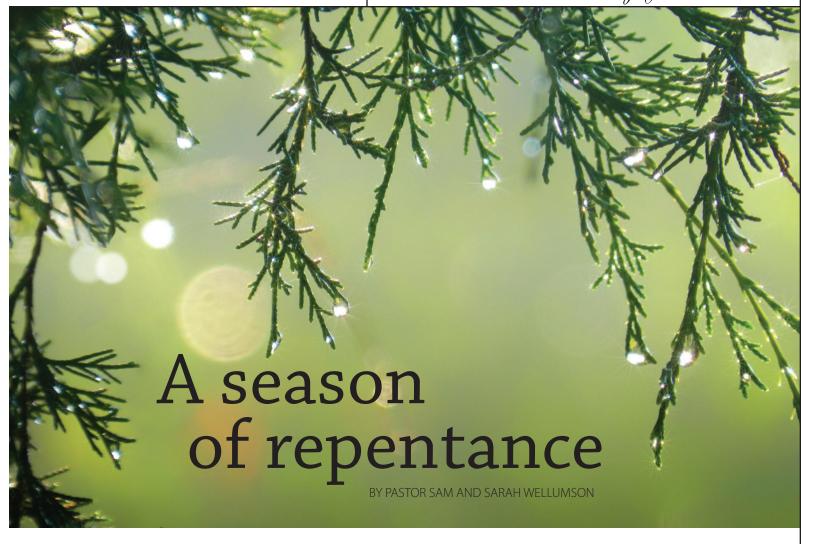
TRACS is recognized by both the United States Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) as a national accrediting body for Christian institutions, colleges, universities, and seminaries. It is a voluntary, non-profit, self-governing organization that provides accreditation to

Christian postsecondary institutions offering associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degrees.

Students at the AFLC Schools graduating in 2015 and beyond will be able to experience the benefits that come with accreditation, including greater ease of transfering credits to other institutions, and seminary graduates should find increased opportunities if they chose to pursue further graduate education.

The AFLC Schools will continue to benefit from the guidance provided by TRACS as they serve as a mentoring accrediting body. The schools have been given five years to work toward full accreditation with TRACS, but the schools are working to complete the process in the next two to three years.

women's missionary federation



dvent is meant to be a season of repentance, a time of preparation and contemplation leading up to the Incarnation. It is a time when we hear the voice of John the Baptizer calling, "Repent, for the kingdom ▶of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2).

Too often, repentance gets pushed to the back burner. The weeks before Christmas fill up very quickly. School and church programs, work parities, and shopping, shopping, shopping. That perfect gift, priced just right is out there ... somewhere.

For a variety of reasons, we find ourselves trying to get through all of our Christmas activities during Advent. Then once Christmas Day has passed, December 26 through whenever becomes the time we recover from the craziness. The four weeks of Advent have flown by, and we feel like we have to repent for not taking the time to repent. Instead of being a season of repentance, Advent becomes a time when I have racked up a long account of sins against myself, my neighbor, my family, and my God.

But this is exactly why God took on flesh. Christ Jesus, the Son of God, came in order to redeem us. Jesus, though He was in the form of God, emptied Himself and took on human form (Philippians 2:6-8). The Son of God and Son of Man came so that He could cancel our long ledger of sins by nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:14). Christ erases all the red ink of our sins and fills us with His perfect righteousness. In baptism, He plucked us up

from our deadness of sin and made us alive together with Him.

In our congregation, we use Vespers for our midweek liturgy during Advent. After the sermon, we responsively read Mary's song, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). As Mary rejoices that God has chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah, she speaks of how God regards all of us who are hopelessly lost in sin: The Mighty One has done great things for us, and in doing so, He has made His name holy. By sending Jesus, He has brought down the mighty and exalted those of low estate. He has helped His servants—His chosen, elect people—in remembrance of His mercy. He has kept His promise to deliver us from sin, death, and the devil.

Jesus was born for sinners, sinners like you and me. Because of Him, there is no condemnation for anyone who is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). Don't forget that the same John who called for repentance is pointing you and everyone to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Because of Jesus, your sin is gone, canceled, erased. Because of Jesus, God couldn't be more pleased with you than He already is.

Advent is a time for repentance, a time of turning from sin. Christmas is a time for rejoicing. Rejoice that because of Christ, as far as God's concerned, your sin never even existed.

The Wellumsons live in East Grand Forks, Minn., where Sam serves Christ the King Free Lutheran.

AFLC memorials: October

AFLBS

Ruth Claus Margaret Holmquist (3) Anna Marie Dahle (2) Maryadele Knudson (2) Paul Eide

AFLTS

Merle and Goldie Gray Arnold and Alice Rokke Dianne Iverson

FLAPS

Harvey Hoops

General Fund

Dominic Rice Anna Marie Dahle

Home Missions

Harvey Hoops Agnes Hviding

Nominating Committee seeks names for coming conference

Members of the Nominating Committee have begun working to identify potential candidates for various boards and corporations of the AFLC to be presented to the 2015 Annual Conference. All terms are five years, unless otherwise noted. Nominations will be needed for the following positions:

AFLC Corporations

- Missions Corporation: 40 nominees for 20 positions
- Schools Corporation: 20 nominees for 10 positions
- ARC Corporation: 20 nominees for 10 positions

Boards and Committees

*Nominee must serve on the corresponding corporation

- Coordinating Committee: (one layman)
- AFLC Schools Board of Trustees: (one pastor*)
- World Missions Committee: (one layman*)
- Home Missions Committee (one pastor*)
- Bay Broadcasting (one layman, three-year term*)
- ARC Board (one layman*)
- Board of Parish Education (one layman)
- Youth Board (one pastor)
- Benefits Board (one pastor)
- Commission on Evangelism (one pastor)
- FLAPS Board (one layman*)

Resolution Committees

Each working committee requires five nominees each, both pastors and laymen. Those elected will serve at the 2016 Annual Conference.

- Administration
- · Schools
- · Missions and Evangelism
- · Publications and Parish Education, and Youth
- · Stewardship, Benefits and Pensions

Pray for the work of the AFLC and consider whether you or someone you know is willing and able to serve on one of these boards, committees or corporations. No names will be presented to the Conference by the Nominating Committee unless the person has been contacted and given their approval.

Please send any suggestions and contact information to the Committee Chair Tony Onnen by mail: 15245 12th St. SW, Cokato, MN 55321. Or call (320) 224-2052, or email tonnen@hotmail.com.

WMF 2015 Bible study now available

The Women's Missionary Federation is offering the 2015 WMF Bible study on the Book of Ephesians. The study, written by Kathy Horneman, includes 11 chapters dealing with topics from salvation, grace, and praise to relationships, spiritual warfare and the armor of God.

The books, which cost \$11 each, are available through the WMF. Send your name, address, church name and address, along with payment to Dawn Johnson, 2991 30th Ave., Wilson, WI, 54027.

Wilderness Bible Camp seeks hosts

The AFLC Wilderness Bible Camp located in scenic northern Minnesota lake country southwest of Detroit Lakes is looking for a campground host(s) for the summer of 2015. Duties would include: opening and closing the camp for the groups that use the camp each summer; cleaning; and grounds maintenance. Recreational vehicle hookup facilities are available, along with dorm-style rooms. If interested or if you know somebody who might be interested, please contact Matt Olson at 612-240-1156.

People and places

Pastor Phil Haugen, a full-time faculty member at the AFLC Schools, has earned a Doctorate of Ministry (D.Min.) with a concentration in General Pastoral Ministry from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.

Licenced Pastor Paul Kneeland has accepted a call to Solid Rock Free Lutheran, Anoka, Minn., where he had been serving as interim pastor.

Pastor Craig Scavo has accepted a call to serve Stillwater Free Lutheran, Culbertson, Mont. He currently serves Faith Lutheran, Durant, Okla.

Pastor Curt Emerson has accepted a call to serve both Zion Free Lutheran, Wadena, Minn., and Bethany Free Lutheran Church of Bluegrass, Sebeka, Minn.

Seminarian Brent (Emily) Raan is finishing up the first half of his internship at Living Word Free Lutheran, Sioux Falls, S.D. He will serve the second half of his seminary internship with AFLC World Missions in Jinja, Uganda, under the mentorship of Pastor Nate Jore.

AFLC BENEVOLENCES Jan. 1-Oct. 31, 2014 FUND REC'D IN OCTOBER TOTAL REC'D TO DATE PRIOR YEAR-TO-DATE General Fund \$35,227 \$280,244 \$281,150 Evangelism 10,752 115,977 112,150 **Youth Ministries** 10,632 107,187 87,131 Parish Education 11,799 110,108 127,487 Seminary 19,410 225,363 246,478 **Bible School** 32,528 401,869 405,822 **Home Missions** 65,694 400,569 386,963 **World Missions** 47,900 392,524 340,285 **Personal Support** 49.343 370,583 373,073 TOTALS \$283,285 \$2,404,425 \$2,360,539

Contact the individual departments for further information about specific financial needs.

Christmas is Jesus Christ

he Incarnation is the title given by theology to the miracle that we celebrate at Christmas. Jesus Christ was "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary," as those who recite the Apostles' Creed confess so simply, yet this teaching presents a paradox that has perplexed great minds while providing a pitfall for some who try to solve it.

Who is Jesus Christ?

"Immanuel," God with us, the prophet foretold (Isaiah 7:14), "Wonderful,



Pastor Robert Lee

Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6). "Son of God," the angel proclaimed to Mary (Luke 1:35); "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord," the shepherds were told (Luke

2:11) ... the *Messiah*, the Promised One.

"In the beginning was the *Word*, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1), the Apostle John declared, and John the Baptizer announced, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29).

These verses are only a sampling of the terms and titles that answer our question by clearly teaching the deity of Jesus Christ. The words of the Nicene Creed proclaim it with full conviction: "Begotten of His Father before all worlds. God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made." He is God.

Yet Holy Scripture also teaches another side to this truth. "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us," (John 1:14). This is what the Incarnation means. God took on human flesh.

Jesus was born (Luke 2:7). He was a baby. He grew (Luke 2:40, 52). Sometimes He was tired (John 4:6) and got thirsty (John 19:28) and hungry (Matthew 4:2). He was tempted (Hebrews 2:18). He became physically weak (Matthew 4:11; Luke 23:26). He suffered, bled, and died (Luke 23:46). Jesus was human in every way, just like us, except for sin (Hebrews 2:17, 4:15).

Although our church constitutions subscribe to the Athanasian Creed, it is rarely read. You can find it in our Ambassador Hymnal, and it would be good to revisit this ancient statement of faith during the Christmas season and ponder the paradox that it teaches, as the following portion reveals:

It is also necessary for eternal salvation that one faithfully believe that our Lord Jesus Christ became man, for this is the right faith, that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is at once God and man: He is God, begotten before the ages of the substance of the Father, and He is man, born in the world and of the substance of His mother; perfect God and perfect man, with reasonable soul and human flesh ... So God and man are one Christ.

Who is Jesus Christ? The early Church hammered out the creeds in response to the ever-present danger of emphasizing His deity at the expense of His humanity or simply making Him into a great human teacher ... or something in between. The names of the old false teachings are mostly forgotten: Adoptianism, Arianism, Docetism, Monophysitism, Monothelitism, Nestorianism ... the list goes on and on, and each is guilty of the same error, giving a wrong answer to the question with which this paragraph begins.

My confirmation pastor taught our class about the so-called "Battle of the Iota," when the 4th century church fathers gathered in response to a false teaching about Jesus in their day. The debate

finally focused on one letter in one word, the Greek letter iota, whose addition or subtraction from the word changed its meaning. Our generation is probably quite impatient with such seemingly nitpicking arguments. Yet Athanasius, the great defender of the faith in his generation, firmly believed that salvation was at stake, and suffered scorn and exile for his convictions. Was he merely being stubborn? No, for unless Jesus is fully man, Athanasius declared, He cannot be the sacrifice for our sins, and

Leave the paradox in peace. Don't waste any time on vain attempts to untangle or harmonize it. Believe it. Celebrate it. Rest in it. Jesus Christ, God and man, is the Christmas gospel.

> unless He is fully God, the sacrifice is not sufficient.

Who is Iesus Christ? The Bible teaches that He is fully God and fully man. Bow before the mystery that is higher than our mortal minds can possibly comprehend. Leave the paradox in peace. Don't waste any time on vain attempts to untangle or harmonize it. Believe it. Celebrate it. Rest in it. Jesus Christ, God and man, is the Christmas gospel.

"O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!"

Best wishes for a blessed Christmas season from the staff and writers of *The* Lutheran Ambassador.

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

Periodicals

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

something to share

The priceless gift of prayer

BY JULIE TWEDT

o you remember a gift you received last Christmas? How about the third gift you opened? It really all became a blur, didn't it?

I enjoy giving gifts. It's no doubt a God-given desire to bless others, but I certainly learned a lot about giving from my mom. As a child, I remember a simple shoebox she had neatly organized with little gifts that she could give on short notice. There was a little of everything in that box for young and old. As we sifted through the house after her death last year, we found that one closet in the basement had been packed full of ungiven gifts. Some gifts even had name tags on them so we knew exactly who they were intended for.

There are several things she gave me that I hold dear, but more cherished are the memories of time spent together. It's not just me though, ask my kids. Baking together. Playing games together. Picking up fallen branches together. Going to the grocery store together. The list goes on and on. Hardly a week goes by without my youngest bringing up how good Grandma's oatmeal was, a special time he spent with her each Tuesday morning. Everyday activities spent together turned out to be better gifts than anything else she could have fit into that closet.

As Christmas draws near, I know I'll spend countless hours brainstorming and searching for the perfect gifts for each one in my own little circle. With all my heart I want to give and watch faces light up, but my heart strings are being tuned to a different song that urges me to give fewer earthly treasures and somehow expand the giving to even more people. How about giving to people beyond my own circle? This year I don't want to give merely to friends and family, but also to acquaintances and even enemies. The budget hasn't changed, but I know what I'm going to give each and every one. Prayer. There is not a single person on this earth who wouldn't benefit from the gift of prayer.

The people we see shopping with tired children need prayer. The cautious elderly drivers need prayer. People we encounter with disabilities need prayer. The one bagging your groceries needs prayer. The neighbor down the hallway of your apartment building needs prayer. Perhaps God will put people in your path today and you will feel led to shower them with the gift of prayer. The one-size-fits-all gift can start now and never end.

"O God of grace, we come to Thee with broken, contrite hearts; Give what Thine eye delights to see, Truth in the inward parts." (From the hymn *Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright.*)

Twedt is a member of Valley Free Lutheran, Portland, N.D.