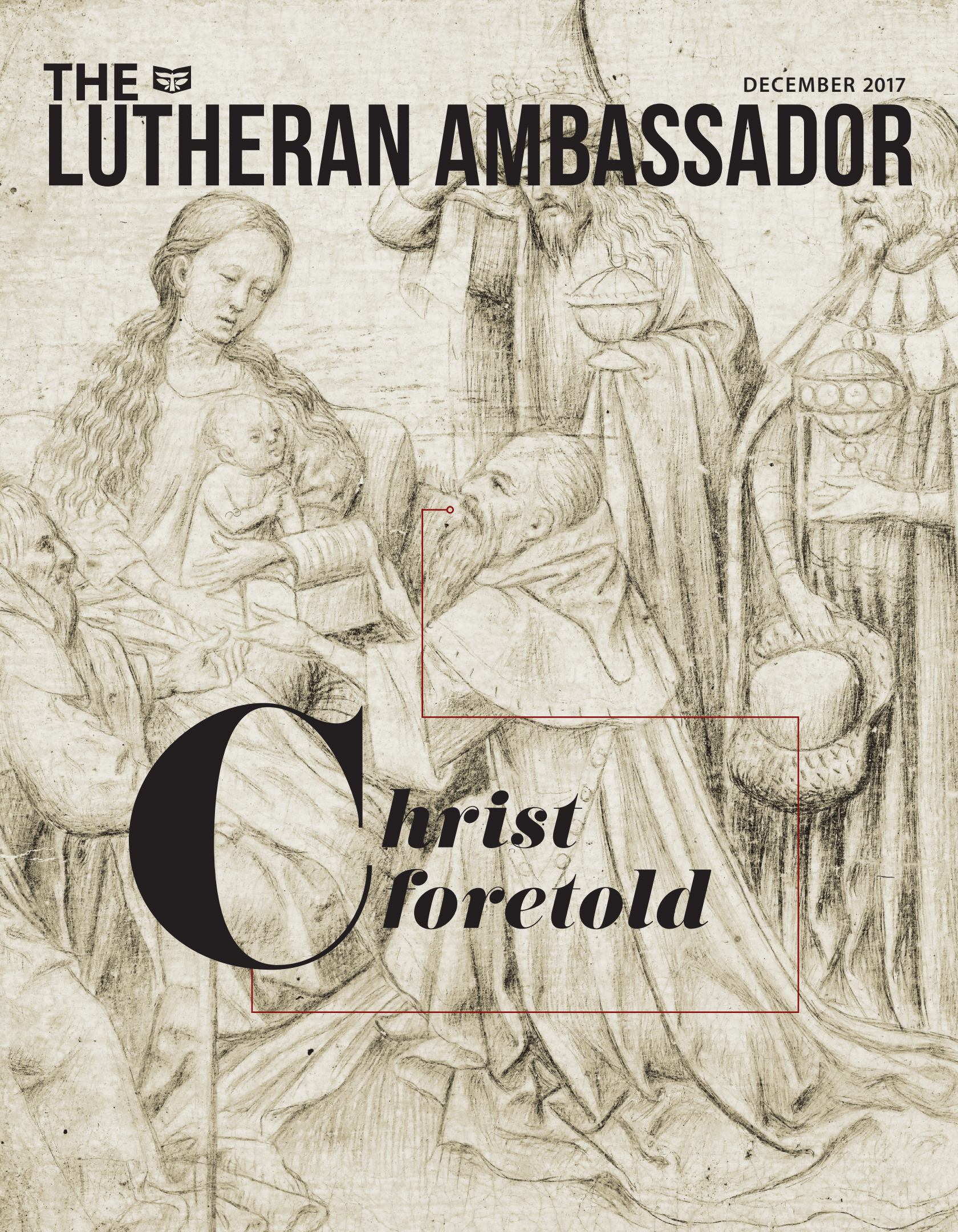


THE 

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LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR



C*hrist
foretold*



THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

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TO GOD'S GLORY ALONE

BY PASTOR PETER FRANZ

No matter who we are, we all like to boast about something—at least in a humble way. We might boast about our education or our grades. Or our children or grandchildren. Or our athletic awards and accomplishments. Some even boast about their nationality. I saw a bumper sticker that said, “It’s hard to be humble when you are Norwegian.” (I didn’t quite understand that one. If I was Norwegian I certainly wouldn’t want people to know it.)

The apostle Paul tells us in I Corinthians 1:31 what we ought to boast in. He says, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

In the verses just prior to this Paul gives us two reasons why we ought to boast in the Lord. First, the power of the cross is life-changing. The ancient Greeks of Paul’s day loved philosophy. They had as many as 50 philosophical parties, and they all prided themselves in their knowledge. So when the early Christians came along and preached the message of the cross it was viewed as foolishness. How could the death of a man on a wooden cross outside of Jerusalem do anything for the world? The message was too simple. It allowed no place for man’s effort, man’s attainment, man’s understanding, or man’s wisdom. To the intellectual Greek’s mind, it just didn’t make any sense.

But what seemed foolish to the Greek philosophers is worthy of our praise because it is through the power of the cross that God saves us. Paul says, “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (vs. 18).

This is why Paul wrote to the Galatian believers, “But may it never be that I would boast,

except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14).

Second, the people God uses are ordinary. The Corinthian church was certainly filled with ordinary people. Paul wrote, “For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble” (vs. 26). Paul didn’t write that there were not any, but “not many.”

Why is this? One reason is because most of those who are wise and influential according to the world’s standards don’t think they need God. They are part of the upper echelon of society and they tend to be self-sufficient. A former governor of Minnesota once said that religion is a crutch for the weak. He obviously didn’t feel he needed a crutch.

Another reason God uses ordinary people is because it is easier for others to see God’s glory through ordinary people. Paul wrote, “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God” (vs. 27-29).

Did you catch that last phrase? “So that no man may boast before God.”

Everything we have is a gift from Him. Therefore, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Franz, who is the vice president of the AFLC, serves Grace Free Lutheran, Maple Grove, Minn.

We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel.

—Phillips Brooks

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,
within my heart, and let it be a quiet chamber, kept for Thee.

—Martin Luther

Flocks were sleeping, shepherds keeping vigil till the morning new. Saw the glory, heard the story, tidings of a gospel true. Thus rejoicing, free from sorrow, praises voicing, greet the morrow: Christ the child was born for you!

—Polish carol

Come, Jesus, glorious heavenly guest, keep Thine own
Christmas in our breast, then David's harpstrings, hushed so
long, shall swell our jubilee of song.

—N.F.S. Grundtvig

He undertakes a great exchange, puts on our human frame,
and in return gives us His realm, His glory, and His name.

—Nikolaus Hermann

The ight of prophecy

By Pastor Matthew Ballmann

Prophecy surrounds us during the Advent season. These prophecies are restated in many forms but are always rooted in God's Word and focused on Christ's first and second coming. We may sit down to a performance of Handel's "Messiah" and listen to the words of prophecy in musical form, such as Isaiah 9:6, "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given." We may read Advent devotionals at home and encounter prophecies given concerning the Messiah which were fulfilled in Christ's coming. Or we may sing about the Rod of Jesse in the words of the classic carol, "O Come O Come Emmanuel," a reference to a prophecy in Isaiah 11. While prophecy surrounds us during the Advent season, we may not always recognize the true nature and significance of it for our lives today.

Second Peter 1:19-21 contains some important words about prophecy: "And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

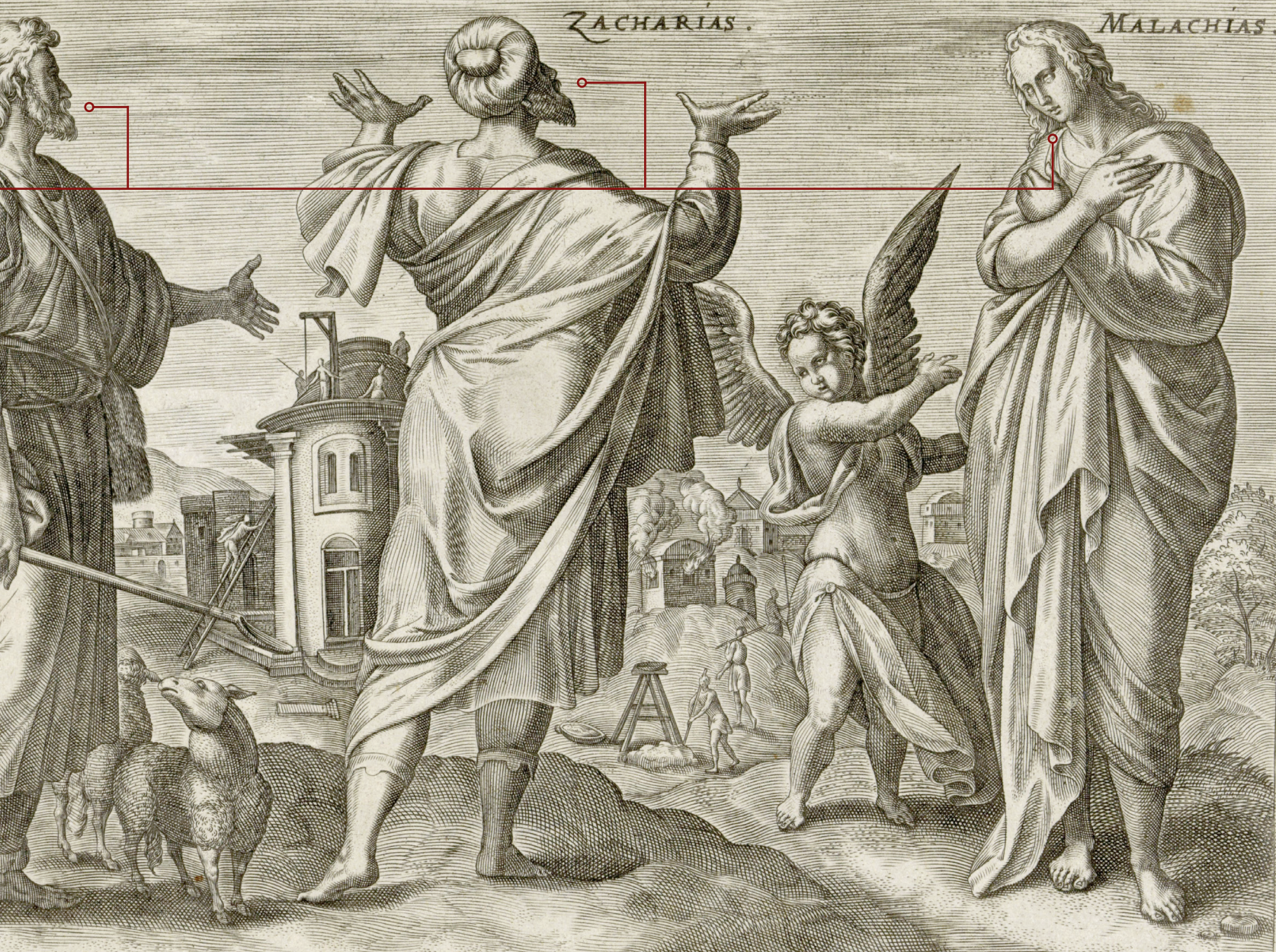
As we ponder the nature of prophecy, we see that it is not a product of human will or thought. Though God has seen fit to use humanity in His delivery of prophecy, the messages are His own, delivered by the work of the Holy Spirit. Just as we see that all Scripture is God-breathed (II Timothy 3:16), so prophecy originates in the person of God through the work of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to looking at the nature of prophecy as the work of the Holy Spirit, we also see that it is in the nature of prophecy to speak of what is to come, and *particularly to point us to Christ* (Revelation 19:10). Peter recommends that we pay close attention to the prophetic word, as we would to a lamp shining in a dark place. Just as the captain of a ship searches through the fog for the beacon of a lighthouse, so we are called

to look earnestly upon the words of prophecy given us in Scripture.

But why is prophecy to be given such diligent focus? Why did God choose to speak to His people so frequently about what is to come? Prophecy serves several different purposes for God's people. First Peter 2:19 shows us the role of Messianic prophecy is to point us to Christ—why and how He will come. Revelation 22:16 tells us Jesus is the bright morning star. He has come through the darkness of night in order to cause the day to dawn. No one needs to be told that we currently live in the night. One look at the evening news, the church prayer list, or the conversation around the lunch table at work will tell us that things are not as they should be on this earth. Sickness, death, and suffering can be found in every corner. The darkness of sin and evil surrounds us. But Christ has come—through His incarnation, death, burial, and resurrection—to shine a light into this dark world. Zechariah prophesied of this in Luke 1:77-79, saying that Christ would come to save and to give light where there has been only darkness. Prophecy speaks to





us of the salvation, the light, that has come to us and will come to us through Christ. It points us to the hope that in the midst of darkness, God has shone a great light (Isaiah 9:2).

We often think of prophecy as only important for those who lived before Christ's incarnation because they needed a means to identify the Messiah. While true, those Old Testament prophecies of Christ's first coming are just as important for us today. Another important role of prophecy is to prove to us the faithfulness, sovereignty, and trustworthiness of our God. As we search the Scriptures and see the many, many words spoken years before which have been fulfilled in Christ's first coming, our faith grows stronger. Through the fulfillment of prophecy we find a confidence in our Savior. He is who He said He was; He did what He said He would do. Looking back and witnessing God's faithfulness in keeping His Word and power in bringing about what He foretold draws us to trust in Him for the

future, as well.

You may not realize it but Lutherans are all about prophecy. Perhaps the grandest and greatest prophecy we get excited about is the one that is yet to be fulfilled. Luke 21:27-28 prophesies to us about the second coming of Christ, "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." One of the most important roles prophecy has in the life of a believer is to bring us to hope in the redemption that is to come.

This Advent season, let us soak in the words of Scripture foretelling the incarnation of Christ. Let us take confidence in the truth of each detail of the nativity story—numerous prophecies come to pass and woven together into the song of salvation. Let us dwell on the faithfulness of God to bring about the fulfillment of centuries of prophetic word concerning the nature and

work of the Messiah. Then, may we also look forward with confidence and hope to Christ's second advent, the resurrection of the body, and the final victory of light over darkness. As we celebrate this season of Advent and reflect upon the prophecies within God's Word, may our faith, hope, and joy in Christ's work be strengthened.

Ballmann serves as the assistant pastor at Abiding Savior Free Lutheran, Sioux Falls, S.D. Artwork: "Amos, Zacharias, Malachias," by Jan Snellinck, 1643. Cover artwork: "The Adoration of the Magi," Jan van Eyck (circle of), c. 1430.



White robed and tinsel-haloed angels. A rustic manger filled with hay and a baby doll in a white blanket. Shepherds in striped bathrobes jostling around to see the baby as the familiar carols of “Away in a Manger” and “Silent Night” are sung. For me, the elements so often wrapped up in an annual children’s Christmas pageant encompass a warm and happy sentimentality, a sentimentality that is brought out, dusted off, and set on display for the season. In those nostalgic moments, it is easy to forget that what is casually

referred to as “the Christmas Story” encompasses more than just shepherds, sheep, and a stable framing a tableau of the holy family.

So often, we disregard the reality that what we celebrate is a birth account encompassing more than just the birth day; that it is, in fact, an historical account of real people, in a real time, facing very real life-altering choices and challenges. In the glitz of modern Christmas celebrations, and in the annual recounting of the proclamation, “Fear not, for behold I bring you tidings of great joy,” it is easy to overlook the reality that the greatest joy for our world was preceded by anxiety, tension, and fear.

Stripping away the glitz and nostalgia, a more accurate beginning to the Christmas story is a man and a woman, banished from a perfect garden with the pronouncement of a promise in the midst of judgement. It is God’s promise to a

flawed king that his line would have an everlasting ruler. It is a groaning and broken world lost in the darkness of sin waiting for God’s promised light to break in and bring ultimate restoration. These realities are what form the true backdrop for Jesus’ birth story. And it is because of God’s promises within this history, that a young, betrothed woman named Mary experienced a life-altering encounter.

Much to my angst, the Bible is vague concerning details surrounding Mary, her family, and what they went through in the nine months preceding Jesus’ birth. While the gospel recorded by Luke provides the most details from Mary’s viewpoint, I cannot help but wish for more. There, within the first chapter of Luke, we are told of the angel Gabriel’s visit, the ensuing conversation between Gabriel and Mary, and Mary’s subsequent visit to her cousin, Elizabeth.



God's Word shall never fail

By Joy Hooper

With such narrative, it is easy to surmise that Mary left on her visit before her pregnancy was evident and came back not being able to hide her condition.

Overlapping Luke's narrative with Matthew's account of Joseph's confusion and decision to divorce Mary quietly, we are shown a very human and gritty side to what we tend to gloss over: emotional pain, confusion, and fear. One can surmise the very probable ostracism from friends and neighbors and the casting of aspersions on Mary's character. We are left to guess at the possible pain and loneliness Mary may have felt.

Yet, for all the details we do not know, God, in His wisdom, made sure the most important details were included for us—those of Mary's spirit and willingness to be used by Him as He saw fit: "I am the Lord's servant ... May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38). Instead of focusing

on fears and pain, Mary's eyes are shown to be fixed on the song God gave her to sing in the midst of those hard times: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46).

We all face times where we feel alone, or hurt, or where God's promises seem far from us. During the Christmas season, these painful feelings often intensify as hopes or desires seem relegated to the realm of the mind or empty philosophical words. These are the times when God seems very far away. Yet, in these times, God, through His Word, encourages us to rest in the assurance that His will for us is to "fear not." And while most of us will never experience an angelically delivered message from God, we can rest assured that we are given a special gift—that through the Holy Spirit, each of us can find rest and, that in Christ's death and resurrection, we

can receive ultimate peace.

Emmanuel is here, holding out His hand for a very real encounter with each of us and He has a song for each of us to sing. In the midst of pain, fears, or loneliness, He promises us His joy, His light, His peace. In all things, we can rest on the assurance of what was spoken to Mary—"Fear not!" No word or promise from God will ever fail.

Hooper is a member of St. John's Lutheran, Duluth, Minn. Artwork: "The Annunciation," by Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi Botticelli (1485-92).

You are blessed

By Christie Friestad

Six Christmases ago holds a particularly unforgettable memory. My cousin, Patricia Pillman, had given birth to her firstborn. My husband, Chad, and I eagerly made the trek from Minneapolis to the snowy Wisconsin countryside to meet our godson. Patricia glowed with joy as she passed Nathanael to me. Looking into his face, emotions swept my heart: gratefulness for Nathanael's safe arrival, excitement for the gift his life would bring to his parents, and secret delight. Just that week I had found out I was carrying a new life in my own womb and, God willing, next summer I would cradle an infant of my own. Patricia and I were two cousins overcome with God's goodness.

Luke 1 tells the story of two cousins, Mary and Elizabeth, who were also overcome with the magnitude of God's goodness ... they were about to play a part in God's promised redemption plan for all mankind. The song they shared was Holy Spirit inspired, with prophecies of spiritual blessing that weave through the centuries to include not just Mary and Elizabeth, but you and me, and ultimately the Son of God Himself.

Mary had just received the angelic visit announcing her miraculous conception of

Jesus. It was impossible to humanly comprehend *how* God was going to do what He said. Opening her hands to fulfill her part in God's plan, Mary humbly declares, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

In faith, Mary packed her bag for a three- to four-day journey to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Whether by foot or donkey, Mary had time to ponder, pray, and go over the angelic visit. If Elizabeth was six months pregnant, as the angel pronounced, Mary would know at a glance if everything was true. I feel as if I should hold my breath with Mary, in anticipation. "Will it all be true like the angel said?"

At last, Mary arrived. I wonder, were they crying, embracing, laughing during their greeting? This old woman and this young girl—cousins with miraculous children in their wombs. It is as they greet one another that a song exploded forth (vs.41-42). "... Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaimed with a loud cry ..."

Elizabeth literally began shouting a four-fold prophetic blessing into Mary's eager face, not from her own emotion, but under direct control of the Spirit of God. While Mary couldn't yet grasp the scope of the prophecies, she must have soaked up every word, pondering them in her heart for a lifetime. Pause to hear the song with me and stand in awe of what God was announcing through Elizabeth.

Mary, you are blessed. Blessed to be the bearer of the Christ. Lowly, poor, common, yet chosen to know the Savior of the World from the first breath of His humanity. She would see Truth in the flesh. Handle Him, feed Him, bathe Him. She would see His justice, kindness, patience, and love more intimately than anyone. She would be utterly transformed by Him. Her eternal salvation would be secured by the Son of her womb.

Eternal Child, You are blessed. Blessed to be the Son who holds the delight of His Heavenly

Father's heart. Blessed to be the Son who gives obedience to His Father and wins the eternal prize. Blessed to be the One to Whom every knee will bow in heaven and on earth.

Elizabeth herself is blessed. Blessed to be part of Messiah's story. Elizabeth called the unborn Jesus her "Lord." Elizabeth declares His deity! She goes on to interpret the physical movement of her unborn child (John the Baptist) as the joy of the Lord, not just ordinary fetal movement, tumbling and kicking. This greatest of all prophets, in utero, was already announcing the Messiah and rejoicing that God's promised Savior was on His way. ("The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice," John 3:29.)

Believer, you are blessed. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (vs. 45). Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth spoke in third person here. No doubt, Elizabeth was talking about Mary's faith, but she was also talking about you and me, and anyone, like Mary, who takes God at His Word and believes God will fulfill all He says He will do.

After 400 years of heavenly silence, the drumroll was sounding, the Child of Promise was coming, and the blessings of a Savior for the world were about to descend. "Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them" (Isaiah 42:9). Not only can we stand in awe of this moment in history, but we can rejoice that God reached down, not just to Mary and Elizabeth, but to you and me.

Friestad is a member of Grace Free Lutheran, Maple Grove, Minn. Artwork: "Visitatie," by Karl van Mallery, c. 1645.





Jesus, God with us

By Clara Gunderson

The perfect timing of God amazes me—time after time! I see it in the Scriptures. And I look back on my life and admit that my heavenly Father's timing has never left me wondering, "Where is He?"

One afternoon my dad told me of how he sensed the hand of the Lord on him all his life. I was amazed because Dad grew up in a rough environment, an abandoned child left with his grandparents to be raised along with a bundle of their own youngsters. In retrospect Dad could see that in his moves, jobs, and avocations, God was with him, bringing him to where he was at that time. I found that comforting, maybe because it validated my own life.

The account of the birth of Jesus in Matthew is one that clearly speaks of this perfect timing as well as the accomplishing of His promise to be *Immanuel* (God with us) to His people. Before the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, as told in Matthew 1:20-23, he had "considered" how to deal with the problem of a pregnant fiancé. He didn't want to disgrace her, Matthew writes. Joseph was, in fact, a righteous man. I understand that to mean that even though he knew he

was not the father of the child, he didn't have it in himself to punish Mary by exposing her publicly. What a difficult circumstance.

It was a situation planned and brought about by the Lord. His message to Joseph is clear: "... that which has been conceived in her (Mary) is of the Holy Spirit." Further divine words instruct Joseph to "not be afraid to take Mary as your wife."

Specific instructions were also given to Joseph regarding the Child's name. This Child, the Son of God, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, would be named *Jesus*, because: He would save His people from their sins. Matthew goes on to tell us more: This account is in fulfillment of the prophecy spoken hundreds of years before when Isaiah wrote, "Behold, the virgin will be with Child and shall bear a Son and they shall call His name *Immanuel*, which translated means 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23, Isaiah 7:14).

How gracious I find the Lord to be as He reveals Himself. My dad recognized the Lord's leading as he took his family from their place of birth to another state, leaving behind friends and extended family. It was in this new place that he found better employment; through God's leading his family established themselves in an evangelical church; it was here they embraced Jesus as *Savior*. And it was here that his girls found their husbands and began families of their own. Yes, God was among all of us ... *Immanuel*.

With the promise of God to not forsake us, to never leave us, my family and I left the United States for missionary service in Bolivia. We did this on the basis of Hebrews 13:5, a verse that has been our hallmark these 50 years since. It reads: "Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.'" *Immanuel*.

Assurance of salvation. Assurance of God's presence. These are the things for which every heart yearns. Isn't that why the crowds followed Jesus and His disciples as they traveled the roads? After His first miracle at the wedding in Cana, Jesus was sought out by the multitudes. What a difference He made to the man born blind, as we read in John 9:6-12; and to the woman at Jacob's well as she received from Him the "water of life," cleansed from her sin (John 4). And what a difference He made in the life of a widow He met walking behind the body of her only son on the way to his burial. She was sought out by Jesus, and given back her son (Luke 7). Bartimaeus in Mark 10 encountered Jesus along the road. When he called out to Jesus, the crowd cautioned him to keep quiet. But Jesus stopped and gave him back his sight.

Jesus had told His family when He was still a child that "it was necessary for Him to be in His Father's house, and occupied about His Father's business" (Luke 2:49, Amplified Version). That business ultimately meant the fulfillment of His name, Jesus—saving His people from their sins. As Isaiah prophesied, the virgin bore a Son and they called Him *Immanuel*, which means God with us.

Today is the perfect time for you, my friend, to consider seriously your relationship with this Savior, to embrace His salvation, too. And this is the perfect time to declare: "He has sent redemption to His people; He has ordained His covenant forever; Holy and awesome is His name" (Psalm 111:9).

Gunderson is a member of Scandia Lutheran, Glenwood, Minn. Artwork: "The Angel Appearing to Joseph in his Dream," Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, c. 1650.

Come to worship

By Andrew Quanbeck

What is pride but an assurance of, and in, oneself? It is a certainty that what one thinks or feels is absolutely right. Pride is naturally arrogant and jealous because it cannot allow something else to be put above itself.

Herod was a prideful and jealous king. In Matthew 2 we read that the Magi had come to Jerusalem to inquire where the newly born King of the Jews was to be found.

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him'" (vs. 1-2).

As a Jew himself, Herod was most likely already familiar with the prophecy regarding the Messiah. It is possible that he already knew the answer to the question. To make certain, though, he called all of the chief priests and scribes together to see where this King had been born (vs. 3-4).

They found the answer in the writings of Micah. There the prophet gave a faithful, God-inspired message foretelling the city of birth from which the ruler would come. "And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; For out of you shall come forth a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel" (vs. 6).

It is interesting to me that Herod seemed to believe the prophecy. Matthew doesn't say that he dismissed it as foolishness and sent the wise men back to where they came from. No, he told the Magi to find the child. He believed the Scriptures enough to plot against the Christ child in order to protect his own reign.

However, he masked his evil intentions with a false humility and asked the Magi to return to him and report where the child was, falsely telling them that he wished to worship Him. Though Herod believed the prophecy, he refused to bow before the Messiah. Instead, he wanted to make sure that this potential threat to his power was wiped out.

Look back at his response to the Magi's question in verse 2: "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (vs. 3).

Herod's level of belief reminds me of the passage from James. "You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder" (2:19, NASB). Herod's belief caused him to fear. It caused him to seek Jesus' death. This was not a saving belief. Again, his pride blinded him to the truth. It seems obvious that were the prophecy true, Herod would not be able to stop it, but his arrogance caused him to believe that he was more powerful than even God.

Do you let your pride get in the way of the gospel message? Do you reject the King in favor of keeping yourself in control? I know that at times I have. I want control and I don't always easily give it up. But the correct response to hearing the message is that which the Magi demonstrated: "We have come to worship Him." A humbling of our hearts to bow before the King of kings.

In the end, humbling ourselves is vastly better than keeping control. We never truly had control over ourselves anyway. Sin was our ruler before Christ. Jesus says in John 8:34, "Truly, truly I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin."

But as we celebrate the Christmas season, we look to Christ, our Savior. It is only in Him that we are freed from our sin. Freed from our pride, selfishness, and jealousy. Instead, we are assured, "Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin" (Romans 6:6-7).

Praise be to God! Let us, too, like the wise men, fall down and worship Him who was born King and Messiah.

Quanbeck, a 2014 graduate of the Association Free Lutheran Bible School, is a member of Maranatha Free Lutheran, Glyndon, Minn. Artwork: "Adoration of the Magi," Giotto di Bondone, c. 1320.







Rachel weeps

By Pastor David Tilney

There is nothing sweet and sentimental about this Christmas story. “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king ...” (Matthew 2:1). Herod had a reputation for being a cruel and bloody king, even killing members of his own family.

The wise men turn up at Herod’s palace to ask, “Where is He who has been born king of the Jews?” (Matthew 2:2). Herod always suspected others were plotting against him, even when they weren’t. He plotted to get rid of this newborn King. He asked the wise men to report to him when they had found the baby. He pretended that he, too, would like to go and worship him. His first attempt to get rid of this newborn King failed when the wise men were warned not to go back to him.

“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men” (2:16). Before Herod’s soldiers arrived in Bethlehem, Joseph, Mary, and the child Jesus escaped during the night and fled to Egypt.

Bethlehem is known not only as the place where Jesus was born, but also the place where Herod’s soldiers slaughtered the children. This is not a place of peace, but a place where the loud crying of parents was heard because their children were now dead.

“Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more’” (2:17-18).

In the time of Jeremiah’s ministry, Rachel wept over her disobedient children being taken into captivity by the Babylonians—a consequence of their unbelief. Now Rachel is heard weeping for the loss of her children. She laments the effects of sin and unbelief of the people. Heart-wrenching cries and loud lamentation fill the land.

The Christ Child has come into a world where rulers like Herod, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot slaughter children for their own political ends. It’s a world where babies are aborted every day, others are brutally treated and killed, and others are sold into prostitution or slavery. It’s a world of death, grief, sorrow, and sin.

Jesus came into a very evil world. Into the real world—where we live, work, and struggle—He came, a Savior who is Christ the Lord. He doesn’t remain above the trouble of this world. Rather, He enters into the fray as a baby, God in the flesh.

Through the Christ Child, God was at work despite what evil the world had planned. Jeremiah chapter 31 declares hope in the midst of despair: “I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow ... Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah ... For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more’” (Jeremiah 31:13, 31, 34).

Of the evil which Herod wreaked, Rachel’s cry of weeping will not be the last sound. A favorite hymn says, “Yet saints their watch are keeping; Their cry goes up, ‘How long?’ And soon the night of weeping Shall be the morn of song” (“The Church’s One Foundation,” Samuel J. Stone).

From the beginning there was opposition to the Lord Jesus. The religious leaders of the day sought to kill Him. The slaughter of the children of Bethlehem reminds us that the manger is inseparable from the cross. On the cross, the Son of God gave His life to save us. Just as there was violence, blood, and pain on that awful day in Bethlehem, there was violence, blood, and pain when Jesus died on Calvary’s cross for our salvation. Thanks be to God that the Lord Jesus has delivered us from sin, death, and the power of hell!

This may not be the Christmas story that we like, but it’s the Christmas story we need. Jesus is “Immanuel, which means ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:23). When evil strikes, when our sorrow is overwhelming, and when death stares us in the face, God is with us. He promises, “I will never leave you, nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). In the suffering and pain of our lives and in the violence of our world, Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us.”

Tilney serves St. Paul’s Lutheran, Cloquet, Minn.

Artwork: “The Massacre of the Innocents,” The Veneto, 17th century.

Dürer & the Christmas gospel

BY SVEIN ELLINGSEN

Praise is an unreliable element in life. Even the greatest praise has had its ebb and flow after some time has passed by. There are only a few exceptions to the rule.

One recipient whose praise has endured without decline is Albrecht Dürer, the great German artist who lived at the same time as Martin Luther and was recognized as equal in greatness for his work in illustration as Luther was for his scriptural exposition in the mother tongue of German. And from the Christian world he received, as did Luther, praise from all later generations.

Through his work, which included several hundred Bible pictures, showing most detail in woodcuts, and reproduced in quite large numbers, he made the New Testament story more living than anyone had done before.

Dürer was himself fully conscious of his exceptional gift and he rejoiced over the reputation he had and the wide admiration his skill received. Anyone else would have been hypocritical or full of himself, unthankful to the Creator. But Dürer wrote one time thus: "God be praised," when it became evident to the world that he had been given such

ability for painting. He viewed the ability of the artist as a gift from God, a way to find the truth about what God has made and done.

He could draw a picture of a rabbit or a lily and do with the faculty of observation and childlike joy over the beauty of nature that which until then was unknown in Europe. He could describe Christ's sufferings with such a balance between sensitivity and simplicity as intimated earlier. Whatever the theme, work has a religious value. It is an expression of service to God, as mankind's position as God's fellow worker.

In many ways, in his picture world, Dürer anticipated the Reformation. Contained in his art is a striking likeness to Luther's explanation of the first and second articles of faith. In the last ten years of his life (he died in 1528), one can note direct influences from Luther's writings. "That Christian man has delivered me from great anxiety and I could wish that I could be able to draw a portrait of him," wrote Dürer. That this didn't come to be is regretful because as a portrait painter Dürer is one of the greatest recognized in the history of art and he could have given to posterity a much clearer idea of Luther's appearance than the existing pictures of him do.

Of the points of comparison that we find between Luther and Dürer is their love for the Christmas gospel, which found expression through inspiring preaching and song. We can only here think of Luther's hymns, "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come," and "Praise to Thee, Christ Jesus."

Dürer returned constantly to the Christmas story for inspiration for further work. In the series of woodcuts, "The Seven Sorrows of the Virgin," he followed what Luke and the other evangelists tell of Jesus' birth. Three of his best known paintings have the Christmas motif; two of them present Christmas night itself and the third is of

the visit of the kings, which we see in connection with this article.

This picture has a gripping human meaning; seldom do we study a work of art so fascinating in itself, so sharply delineated, showing us that a child is born into the world. Dürer lived in a childless marriage and he surely had his distressful thoughts when he time after time put the newborn child Jesus as the central figure in his pictures.

But the most important thing for him was likely to show the special importance of Jesus' birth, what His coming to earth means. Dürer's Christmas drawings are filled with theological meaning, revealed in symbols. Symbols were understood by people during the Middle Ages through pictorial expression. Dürer used that which was in living tradition, but transformed by the Renaissance, and with his own style, so that at the same time what he produced was understandable and strikingly new.

It isn't necessary to interpret all of these symbols in order to appreciate Dürer's Christmas pictures. We see immediately the message of the incarnation's wonder as its rays shine forth. And we can pray the prayer which the artist once placed below a picture as our own prayer: "O highest heavenly Father, ignite with thy Son Jesus Christ such a light in our hearts that we learn to know the message we are joined to, so that we in good conscience can lay all other burdens down and serve Thee, eternal heavenly Father, with cheerfulness and joy."

Translated from Norwegian by Pastor Raynard Huglen, Newfolden, Minn., this article first appeared in Hellig Jul, 1964. Artwork: "Adoration of the Magi," by Albrecht Dürer, 1504.





L

uther first wrote
"From Heaven Above
to Earth I Come" for
his family's Christmas
Eve observance. The

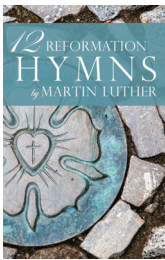
first seven stanzas were sung by a man dressed in an angel's costume. Stanzas 8 through 15 were sung by the children in response to the angel's message.

Stanzas 13, 14, and 15 should be memorized by every child, for in these stanzas we have the best of Luther's poetry. Without this hymn, our Christmas hymns would be impoverished.

J. S. Bach used one of the settings of "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" in his great "Christmas Oratorio."

~Pastor Gordon Waterman
Crown of Life Lutheran
Tomball, Texas

These hymns are featured in a new booklet from Ambassador Publications, *12 Reformation Hymns by Martin Luther*. Featuring a hymn of Luther for each month of the year, the booklet is available for \$2/each. For more information, visit ambassadorpublications.org.



From heaven above to earth I come

1. "From heav'n above to earth I come
To bear good news to ev'ry home;
Glad tidings of great joy I bring,
Whereof I now will say and sing:
2. "To you this night is born a child
Of Mary, chosen virgin mild;
This little child, of lowly birth,
Shall be the joy of all the earth.
3. "This is the Christ, our God and Lord
Who in all need shall aid afford;
He will Himself your Savior be
From all your sins to set you free.
4. "He will on you the gifts bestow
Prepared by God for all below,
That in His kingdom, bright and fair,
You may with us His glory share.
5. "These are the tokens ye shall mark:
The swaddling-clothes and manger dark;
There ye shall find the Infant laid
By whom the heavens and earth were made."
6. Now let us all with gladsome cheer
Go with the shepherds and draw near
To see the precious Gift of God,
Who hath His own dear Son bestowed.
7. Give heed, my heart, lift up thine eyes!
What is it in yon manger lies?
Who is this child, so young and fair?
The blessed Christ-child lieth there.
8. Welcome to earth, Thou noble Guest,
Through whom the sinful world is blest!
Thou com'st to share my misery;

What can we render, Lord, to Thee?

9. Ah, Lord, who hast created all,
How weak art Thou, how poor and small,
That Thou dost choose Thine infant bed
Where humble cattle lately fed!
10. Were earth a thousand times as fair,
Beset with gold and jewels rare,
It yet were far too poor to be
A narrow cradle, Lord, for Thee.
11. For velvets soft and silken stuff
Thou hast but hay and straw so rough,
Whereon Thou, King, so rich and great,
As 'twere Thy heaven, art throned in state.
12. And thus, dear Lord, it pleaseth Thee
To make this truth quite plain to me,
That all the world's wealth, honor, might,
Are naught and worthless in Thy sight.
13. Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,
Within my heart, that it may be
A quiet chamber kept for Thee.
14. My heart with very joy doth leap,
My lips no more can silence keep;
I, too, must sing with joyful tongue
That sweetest ancient cradle-song:
15. Glory to God in highest heaven,
Who unto us His Son hath given!
While angels sing with pious mirth
A glad new year to all the earth.
Amen.

H

aving received too much change from the drive thru checkout clerk at McDonald's, Lynn

tried to return what was not due her. The clerk was unwilling to believe her concern or even to reason it out with her. He was positive he was right. What more could be done but allow the error to stand?

As much as we like to be confident that we know the truth, if the truth we are confident about is actually not true, our trust is placed in a lie. Sometimes the consequence is small as it is over a small matter. If the matter is of great importance, however, the consequences can be great.

While we don't like to admit it, we can be wrong, even when we are very confident of being right. To be humble enough to listen to others and consider the possibility that you or I may be mistaken can save us a great deal of trouble. Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount, "If the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matthew 6:23b).

One of the saddest statements in God's Word says, "He came to that which was His own, but His own did not

GOD'S TRUE WORD

BY PASTOR JON AND LYNN WELLUMSON

receive Him" (John 1:11). Why didn't the Jews accept Jesus as the Messiah? Even though they had God's Word, they were confident in their own ideas of what to expect when the Messiah came. He was going to set all things right. Their suffering from enemies, disease, hunger, and all the trials they experienced were going to come to an end. Parts of God's Word which supported their view were cited to establish their case. Any passages from God's Word that seemed to show flaws in their certainties were explained away or ignored. What was the consequence of their unfounded confidence? Lost for all eternity.

Many today are talking about the Savior as though He has made a life of financial prosperity, health, and no troubles possible for any who believe. It sounds attractive, and God's Word can be misused to support such a view. The danger is that we become confident these views are true; they are not!

As the preparation season of Advent is upon us, may we be wise in approaching God's Word,

weary of man's ideas and the deception of our old nature. The Church and the gifts God has given believers through the ages are provided by God that we may seek the Savior we truly need. Galatians 4:4-5 says, "But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." Redemption from the law is what we need. When we learn to distrust our own thoughts and desires, the Savior God leads us to His Word, the one who "has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, bought me and freed me from all sins, death, and the power of the devil, not with silver and gold, but with His holy and precious blood and His innocent sufferings and death" (Martin Luther). As you seek God's gift, have a joyous Christmas.

The Wellumsons live in Williston, N.D., where Pastor Wellumson serves Emmanuel Free Lutheran and Beaver Creek Lutheran, Ray, N.D.

AFLC Schools host Reformation concert, highlighting five 'Solae'



The AFLC Schools hosted a Reformation Hymn Festival on Nov. 10, which featured new music on the five *solae* of the Reformation, composed by Josh Bauder. The 117-strong choir, and 20-member chamber orchestra took part in the event, which also featured a congregational singing of four of Martin Luther's hymns. The event was directed by Andrew Hanson, above.

W

hat do you think about when you think of Christmas?

Perhaps you think

of the nativity scene and the baby Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem. In Brazil, my home country, the general population is nominally Roman Catholic. At Christmastime families take turns parading a little baby Jesus statue and an image the Virgin Mary—the patron saint of Brazil—from house to house during the nine days before Christmas. On Christmas Eve people from all around the village walk in procession to the local Catholic church to place the baby Jesus in the manger.

The idea of cute little baby Jesus in a manger ought not be the primary focus of Christmas cheer. The incarnation is amazing, but Christmas is not about a manger. The gospel that the apostles preached centered not around a baby, but on the crucified and risen King who accomplished the divine rescue mission for humanity. As Paul declared in I Timothy 1:15, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

Have you ever thought of God incarnate as a missionary?

THE BEST MISSION STORY

BY MATTHEW ABEL

Most Christians understand that a missionary is one who has been sent with the gospel to a foreign people to lead them to faith in Christ. Christmas is the ultimate missionary story. The Father sent Jesus into the world with an eternal purpose. He was not sent “to condemn the world, but rather that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:17). The Gospels focus on how Jesus accomplished the mission for which He was sent. At the end of His life and ministry, He prayed to the Father, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do” (John 17:4). He made disciples and sent them as missionaries “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). He commissioned them to make disciples, to baptize, and to teach obedience to all that He commanded (Matthew 28:19-20).

As you celebrate Christmas and worship the Savior, remember that Christmas is not about a baby; it’s about a King. Remember that the mission of Christmas continues until the Second Advent. Remember that the Savior whom you worship at Christmastime desires to be the Savior of all through faith. As it is written:

“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.... For



‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” (Romans 10:9, 13-15).

Abel is an AFLC missionary serving in Curitiba, Brazil, with his wife, Ednay.

PEOPLE & PLACES

Setell, the Free Lutheran Theological Seminary in Campo Mourão, Brazil, celebrated the institution's 50th anniversary on Nov. 25. The event was held in conjunction with AFLC-Brazil's annual conference. In attendance were students, staff, alumni, former professors, and former officials.

Pastor Dennis Norby has accepted a call to serve Grace Free Lutheran and Zion Lutheran, Valley City, N.D. Norby has resigned from his call to Hope Lutheran, Enderlin, N.D., and will step down in January.

AFLC Home Missions will host a leadership retreat Feb. 5-9 at Calvary Free Lutheran, Mesa, Ariz. The theme will be "Worship," taken from Romans 12:1-3.

Members of **Bethlehem Lutheran**, Morris, Ill., and **St. Petrie Lutheran**, Leland, Ill., celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation on Oct. 28 with a dinner and program. Pastor Steven Lombardo, Sr., was the keynote speaker. His message was on "Luther and the Sufficient Word of God." Both congregations are thankful to the Lord for Martin Luther's rediscovery of the gospel and his unwavering stand upon the Word of God.

Pastor Seth Forness has been removed from the AFLC clergy roster at his own request. The Coordinating Committee accepted his decision with regret. He served on the staff of Christ the King Lutheran, Pipestone, Minn., and future plans are uncertain at this time. Members of the Coordinating Committee ask for prayer for him and his family during this time.

News from AFLC World Missions

• Josh and Ruthie Wagner

Josh and Ruthie Wagner, AFLC missionaries on loan to Lutheran Bible Translators, have taken medical leave from their assignment in Sierra Leone following the birth of their fourth child, Elizabeth. Born on Oct. 9, Elizabeth experienced medical complications and was in need of special care. The Wagners returned to Minneapolis on Oct. 25. The Lord provided and they were able to find housing and transportation arrangements despite the short notice. The family expects their time in the U.S. will become a more typical home assignment after the medical issues are better resolved. Please pray for the health of baby Elizabeth and for the whole family as they make this adjustment.

• Michael Rokenbrodt

Michael Rokenbrodt has accepted a call to serve as an AFLC missionary and will be commissioned at the AFLC Annual Conference in June 2018, though he will begin his service in Uganda in January. Rokenbrodt will serve as a seasonal missionary, working in Uganda each January through May. His work includes teaching pastors and church leaders with other AFLC Ugandan missionaries. During the remaining part of the year, he will be employed at Luther Island Bible Camp, near Henning, Minn., and do deputation work. He has worked at this camp annually for 12 years and wishes to continue his involvement in their ministry.

Rokenbrodt is a member of Zion Free Lutheran, Wadena, Minn. In 2009, he graduated from Concordia University in Saint Paul, Minn., with a bachelor's degree in education and Lutheran classroom certification. In addition to his major, he obtained minors in Lutheran confessions and theatre arts. His passion for teaching and drama are unique and useful assets of his ministry as he is able to effectively engage people. Rokenbrodt spent six years teaching English and theology full-time while continuing camp ministry in the summers. He served two assignments in Uganda as a short term assistant with Journey Missions, beginning in 2015. He worked alongside Micah Berger in northern Uganda and with the Ambassador Institute curriculum.



OCTOBER MEMORIALS

AFLBS

Ruth Claus
Irene Larson

AFLTS

Allen Nelson

General Fund

Maurice Johnson

Home Missions

Carol Dietsche

Vision

Brian Mickelson

World Missions

Mabel Quanbeck

WMF

Beverly Moberg
Dileen Ninke

... in honor of

Evangelism

Pastor Elden Nelson

Home Missions

Pastor Elden Nelson

Miriam Infant Home

Onella Ross

AFLC BENEVOLENCES January 1-October 31, 2017

FUND	REC'D IN OCTOBER	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	PRIOR YEAR-TO-DATE
General Fund	\$26,246	\$304,441	\$308,237
Evangelism	8,268	102,728	94,004
Youth Ministries	6,681	79,719	77,285
Parish Education	7,882	137,895	112,004
Seminary	38,218	207,239	180,718
Bible School	31,897	409,615	384,372
Home Missions	24,483	396,058	347,881
World Missions	27,856	325,622	386,409
Personal Support	43,661	449,202	432,643
TOTALS	\$215,193	\$2,412,517	\$2,323,555

For additional financial information for each department, go to www.aflc.org/giving

CHRISTMAS BREAKS THROUGH

The idea of breaks or breaking is certainly something that can be associated with the holiday season. Classrooms and dormitories are emptied as students go home for the Christmas break.



Pastor Robert Lee

Perhaps those with small children think of the breaking of toys that are received as presents and handled too carelessly. But there is also a breakthrough that blesses us when remembered.

*Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light,
and usher in the morning;
Ye shepherds, shrink not with affright,
but hear the angel's warning.
This Child, now born in infancy, our
confidence and joy shall be,
The power of Satan breaking, our peace
eternal making.*

Light broke through the darkness on the first Christmas. This happened literally when the “glory of the Lord” shone around the shepherds (Luke 2:9). Think of how bright that heavenly light must have been. This light was foretold in the words of Isaiah’s prophecy: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (Isaiah 60:1). But the breakthrough of Christmas light speaks of more than a onetime event. When Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms, he thanked God that he had seen His salvation ... “a light to shine upon the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32). This light is Jesus, who is the light of the world (John 8:12).

Light shines brightest when the world around us is darkest. The words of the Christmas hymn verse above (*Ambassador Hymnal*, #49), perhaps not one of the most familiar ones, were written by Johann Rist,

who lived through the dark and terrible days of the brutal Thirty Years War, when armies marched and countermarched all over Germany, spreading disease and causing famine. Multitudes were killed in battle, but even more died from the hunger and “pestilence” than the actual warfare. A university where Rist studied was virtually emptied, and he spent a long period of time in bed recovering from an illness that almost took his life. Yet the light still shines.

The hymns of Pastor Rist (680 of them!) are said to cover the whole range of theology and all the circumstances of human life.

One that seems to reflect the darkness of his days is included in our hymnals (#88): “O Darkest Woe,” a mournful meditation on the death of Christ that prepares us for our last days on earth. A different note is sounded in “O Living Bread from Heaven” (#282), a post-communion hymn. Yet even in the midst of the joy of receiving the living bread, there is the reality of woe and death. His New Year’s hymn, “Help Us, O God, Behold We Enter Upon Another Year Today,” closes with a prayer that God would cover our heads in times of fear and woes, so that we may appear with joy before His throne when our years are gone.

“Every day is dark to me,” said a lady suffering from a sight affliction. But there are others who know dark days that have nothing to do with their eyes. Illness of the body or mind, the death of dear ones, unresolved conflict between friends and

family members, financial struggles, fears, loneliness ... these and more can make life seem very dark indeed. “When I expected good, then evil came; when I waited for light, then darkness came” (Job 30:26).

Then there is spiritual darkness. Those who do not believe in Jesus are dwelling in darkness, walking in darkness (John

12:35, 46), and the darkness has blinded their eyes (I John 2:11). This is the saddest darkness of all, and the most frightening thing about it is that unbelievers have grown to love darkness rather than the light; in fact, they hate the light, because they do not want their

evil deeds to be exposed (John 3:19-20).

Are you passing through days of darkness?

Listen, the light of Christmas is breaking through, and the darkness will be overcome! The Babe of Bethlehem is the Christ of Calvary, for there is the shadow of a cross over the manger. The gift has been given, the price has been paid. All things are ready. Look to Jesus! Come and be blessed, for now and for all eternity!

*All blessing, thanks and praise to Thee,
Lord Jesus Christ be given;
Thou hast our brother deigned to be,
our foes in sunder riven.
O grant us through our day of grace
with constant praise to seek Thy
face;
Grant us ere long in glory with praises
to adore Thee.*

*Listen, the light
of Christmas is
breaking through,
and the darkness
will be overcome!*

something to share

THE GLORIOUS ORDINARY

BY JENNIFER THORSON

I held the dripping white candle with small, unsteady hands, my face and the face of my curly-haired cousin next to me glowing in the light of dozens of other candles held by the faithful who had gathered for the Christmas Eve service in the tiny town near where my grandparents farmed.

As the congregation sang “Silent Night,” all of our little voices joined in, the 100-year-old sanctuary echoing with the harmony of the beloved Christmas carol. I remember those moments of my childhood as being beautiful and sacred, full of wonder and peace as we stood safely in the church pew singing of Jesus’ birth with our large extended family and other worshipers while the cold winds of winter blew around us.

Maybe, like me, you remember the slightly romanticized moments of your Christmases past. In reality they were likely full of both joy and chaos. And it’s possible that is how Christians sometimes recall the account of Christ’s birth, as well—more idyllic and peaceful than it actually was.

The Gospel of Luke shares the story in brief but unglamorous detail: Joseph, who had just recently taken the advice of

an angel and put aside his plan to abandon Mary, took a difficult journey with his betrothed, great with child, as he hurried to obey and honor his family heritage by returning to his homeland. Upon arriving and learning the city was full of people seeking to obey the same decree, Joseph and Mary realized the time was near for her first child to be born. In the nick of time they were able to squeeze into place with the animals and find a feeding trough as a bed for the tiny newborn.

This most significant event in history *was* beautiful and sacred, but it was likely neither silent nor calm, as Franz Gruber described in his Christmas carol. The days leading up to Christ’s birth were rushed and chaotic, and based on the amount of people who crowded into the small town of Bethlehem with their pack animals in tow, the barn where Jesus made His arrival was understandably smelly and cramped. Mary and Joseph were ordinary people, not completely understanding that they were part of an extraordinary event that would change everything.

Into the chaotic, messy, and unromantic world, Jesus arrived in a way that made Him noticeable only to the

unnoticed, common citizens of that day. When the angels appeared and led the shepherds to the manger where Jesus’ lay, they dispersed throughout the countryside to tell their friends and family, who didn’t understand that this holy infant was the Messiah they had waited so long to see.

And yet we can rejoice in the majesty of God which was demonstrated that wondrous moment when the Son of God became “Immanuel, God with us” (Matthew 1:23). The angels sang and the shepherds rejoiced even in their fear as the “glory of the Lord shone around them” (Luke 2:9).

His birth was the glorious in the ordinary, the calm in the chaos which brought light into the darkness. Even in the imperfection of Christmases past and present, there is beauty and peace because of the Savior. The arrival of Immanuel is the true reason that wonder was found in the seemingly simple worship of believers on Christmas Eve in the sanctuary of that small town church many years ago. And it is still found to this day.

Thorson is a member of Living Word Free Lutheran, Sioux Falls, S.D.