

THE LUTHERAN  
**AMBASSADOR**

December 12, 2000

**Be  
born  
in us  
today**



# THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

December 12, 2000  
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## AN ENCOURAGING WORD

### The real reason for the season

**W**hat is the reason for the season? I know the common answer is that Jesus is the reason for the season. I've even seen that printed on shopping bags from Christian book stores. Certainly, we would not have Christmas if Jesus had not come. And certainly, Jesus is the focus of Christmas. However, Jesus is not really the reason for the Christmas season.

Dear readers, you are the reason for the season! Galatians 4:4-5 says, "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law" (now pay special attention to this next phrase), "in order that he might redeem those who were under the Law," (here it comes again) "that we might receive the adoption as sons." Did you catch that? God sent His Son in order that you might be redeemed and receive the adoption as children of God. The angel says in Luke 2:11, "For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Jesus came for your sake! He was "born under the Law." He said in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." Jesus came to fulfill the Law of God on your behalf. He came to do what you and I could never do. He also came "that He might redeem those under the Law." Every one of us has broken God's Law miserably. You and I have mounted up a debt of fines that we could never pay. But Jesus came to pay that debt with His life so that you and I "might receive the adoption as sons." Jesus came to make it possible for you and me to be a part of God's family with all the privileges included.

Notice the "might redeem" and the "might receive the adoption" statements. There is a sort of question mark in these. I can remember many Christmas celebrations at my grandmother's home. In her later years, when a present was given to her, she would look at the nicely wrapped box and say, "Oh, it's beautiful!" Then she would just sit there and hold the wrapped box as if that was it. With great anticipation we would encourage her to open the gift. Many people are like that with Jesus. They admire Him and what He did, but they don't open the gift. Romans 6:23 says, "The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

As a child at Christmas, I knew the last gift to open was the best one. With much anticipation, I tore into that present without hesitating. Oh, may we adults be with Jesus as children are with the best gifts. May we, without hesitancy and with much anticipation, always seek and trust Jesus. In Him is the fulfillment of the Law. In Him you are redeemed. In Him you are a child of God with an inheritance that is out of this world. Jesus is the gift that will not disappoint you. May you have a Merry Christmas and a blessed gift opening! And keep in mind, you are the reason for the season.



— **Pastor Tim Johnson**  
**Resurrection Free Lutheran**  
**Beltrami, Minnesota**

# Home for Christmas

The time was mid-December of last year, and Christmas was fast approaching. The death of my dad a couple of weeks earlier seemed to overshadow the holiday preparations for me, and it was difficult to “get in the mood” for the celebration. Also, our son Adam who lives in South Korea planned to spend his winter vacation with friends in Australia, which meant another vacant place at home this year. It just didn’t feel like Christmas.

I went home for lunch one day, and knowing it was a day when my grandson Seth would be at our house, looked for him to meet me at the door as usual, but he wasn’t there. “He’s in the bedroom watching a video,” my wife said, which made me wonder if grandpa’s arrival was no longer any great event for him.

Yes, Seth was in the bedroom all right, but he was sitting on Adam’s lap. To my absolute amazement, Adam had decided to surprise his family by coming home for Christmas, and for us it was the best gift of all.

There’s something about home and Christmas that seem to be almost inseparable. Most of our holiday traditions were learned at home, and are passed on from one generation to another. Each reader probably has some custom or another that, if it were missing, would make you decide that the season didn’t feel much like Christmas, either. Most difficult of all is when loved ones aren’t there to celebrate with us.

Maybe the thought of home and Christmas creates such a heartfelt response within us because Mary and Joseph were far away from home when Jesus was born. One of the most touching portions of the biblical account is the word that there was no room for them in the inn at Bethlehem (Luke 2:7). Maybe the hunger for home is an aspect of the emptiness within us that cannot be filled without a saving knowledge of Christ.

Home is a reminder of heaven, the true home of the Christian. It is also a picture of salvation. There is an old gospel song, not usually associated with Christmas at all, which says: “Coming home, coming home, never more to roam. Open wide Thine arms of love; Lord, I’m coming home.” May our prayer this holiday season and throughout the year be that many might come home indeed through faith in Jesus Christ.

A Blessed Christmas to you all!

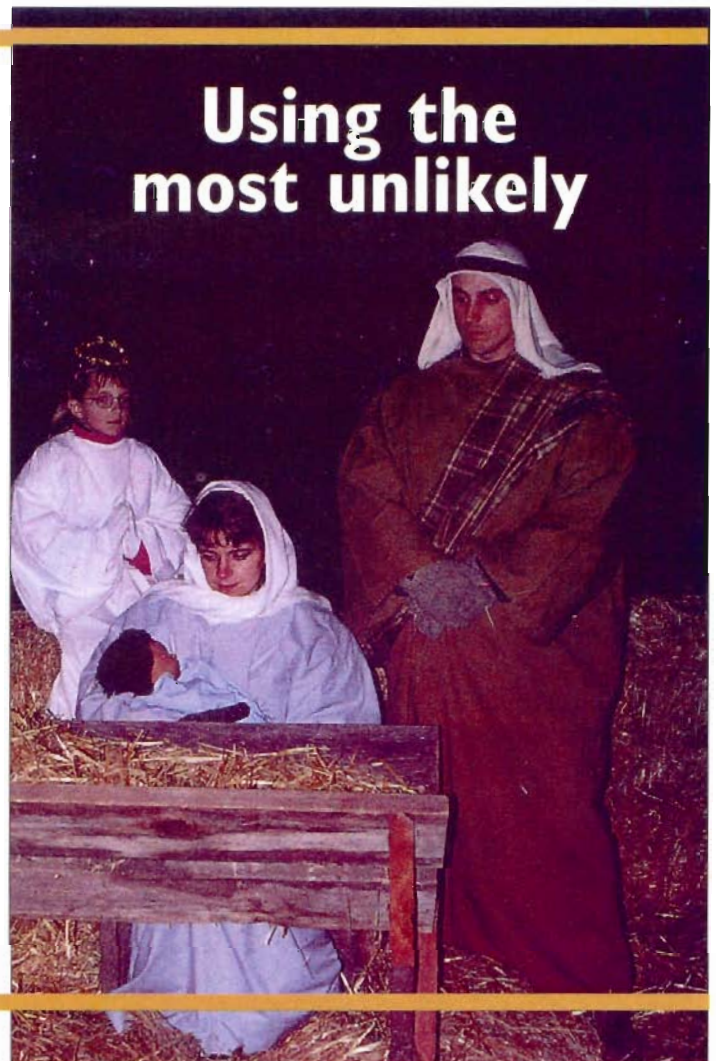
— *Rev. Robert L. Lee*  
*AFLC president*





**Good news for  
all the people;  
there has been  
born for you  
a Savior,  
who is Christ  
the Lord.**

— Luke 2:10-11



— Pastor Donald Norr  
Good Shepherd Lutheran  
Virginia, Minnesota

**T**he message for all time that comes to us through the story of Christ's birth is a message of hope. "A Savior has been born for you," makes it a personal event. It speaks to us of a Savior who sets us free from the bondage of sin that imprisons us. Sin holds us back from living a life that brings glory to the God who loves us so much He not only created us but He created an entire world of majestic beauty for us to live in. This world remains a prison for many people who have spurned the offer of help provided by the sacrificial death of our Savior.

The events that come to pass in this world as well as the events that come to pass in our lives are very complex and involved. God's plan for us goes all the way back to a time before the foundation of the world was put in place. God uses plain, common, ordinary people to help carry out His plan. What a blessing it is for us to know that we need not be a person born to special privilege to be used by God, but just the opposite is true. God usually uses the most unlikely persons to carry the message of His love and mercy to others.



God used an elderly couple who had no children to bear a son who would prepare a people to receive the prophesied Savior of the world. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both advanced in years, beyond the age of childbearing. "They were both righteous in the sight of the God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord" (Luke 1:6).



God used a young woman who had no husband to bear the Christ Child. Her name was Mary. She was called, "Favored one of the Lord," by the angel Gabriel, a bondservant of the Lord.



God used a young, simple carpenter to take a young woman who was pregnant and a virgin as his wife, to protect her and give her the respect due a wife in that day. He was a righteous man, obedient to the Lord and the civil law of the land as he took his pregnant wife back to his childhood home to register for the census ordered by the governor.



God used a small band of men who had no social standing to first hear the announcement, "I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). That little group were shepherds tending sheep out in the fields that night.



God used a Savior who had no power or might at birth to come into a darkened world in the most humble way. He had no proper place for His birth and no one other than his parents to welcome Him. "He came as God but did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:6-7).

God sent His Son into a sin-darkened, arrogant, rebellious world to a people that had been chosen as His own personal possession, but now had become indifferent and blinded by a mere form of worship. They refused to acknowledge that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, the Anointed One.

The signs of His coming were evident. The prophecies spoken of in the Old Testament regarding His coming were being fulfilled. John the Baptist, the prophet of God, was on the scene warning the people, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). On another day, John saw Jesus coming to him and he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Many of the religious leaders refused to believe but instead set their hearts toward destroying Him.

Our world today is very much like the world Jesus was born into. Many miss the truth of the Scriptures that says of Jesus: "The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Our darkened world becomes darker, but "The true light which, coming into the world enlightens every man" (John 1:9), continues to show forth brighter. Praise God!

The Christlike character of each of the persons involved in this divine event was first a pure heart, or righteousness — a right standing before God. The second quality was humility. Micah 6:8 asks: "What does God require of me?" It then answers, "To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." The third quality demonstrated was obedience, a willingness to follow God wherever He leads no matter what the consequences.

God uses the most unlikely of people and circumstances to work out His plan. He even desires to use you and me!

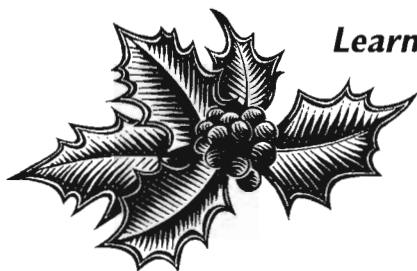


*"I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life."*

— John 8:12







## Learning from Eliza-

# Living a life

**I**f you drove by our home during the spring planting time, it would be evident to you that we love "Impatiens." The abundance of fifty beautiful plants speaks for itself. What is not evident without closer inspection is that sometime before they are all in the ground, the name of those plants could be spelled "impatience." That's when I need to put on the full armor of God just to work in my yard.

The name of the flower must be like those subliminal images they warn us about. Perhaps the planting instructions: "grows in all types of soil and flourishes in the light of the sun or in the shade of darkness," should be a warning that we're not immune to the worldly seeds of impatience sprouting in our own hearts. God's instructions in Philip-  
pians 4:8 teaches us to think about "whatever is pure, lovely, admirable, and praiseworthy." We should sing hymns of praise or turn on the hose to remind us of His streams of living water that we might sow "in patience."

God's Word in Luke 1 introduces us to Elizabeth, one who sowed in the Spirit, not in the flesh. Her contentment in being able to do so is founded on her inheritance from a godly family and more so in her inheritance of being in the family of God. She and her husband, Zechariah, were righteous in God's eyes because of their obedience in following His commandments.

Patience was indeed like a beautiful flower that Elizabeth nurtured in the soil of faith, hope and trust. The hardness of its deep roots were not weakened by time but, in fact, grew stronger and deeper through the pain of disgrace in remaining barren, and her deep desire to bear a son to her beloved husband who was a priest of God's own choosing. In prayer and in praise she came to

God with empty, unsoiled hands in submission to His filling according to His perfect will and timing.

Surely people marveled at her patience, and yet I'm quite sure many questioned her unchangeable longing and desire to bear a child year after year after year. Elizabeth's patience in waiting upon the God of second chances never wavered or grew weary, because it was rooted in godly soil, watered by His stream of living water and flourished in the light of the promised Messiah.

God looked down upon her heart of patience in favor and delight. He filled her empty, outstretched hands with His most precious gift — life. Her godly character is exemplified when in faith she responded with great joy and gladness to Mary's announcement that she was to be the mother of the promised Messiah. A message from God in faith gives us great joy and gladness. It must not be shallow but it must penetrate our whole being, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to gain the victory we see in the

*Imagine what it might have been  
like to be a friend of Joseph ...*

## Joseph a man who trusted God

— *Cliff and Virginia Eastvold,  
St. John's Lutheran  
Duluth, Minnesota*

**H**i, I'm Benji. I am one of the many orphans who used to roam the streets of Nazareth until a family took me in. One of the family's sons was Joseph and he took me as an apprentice in his carpenter's shop.

There was so much to do ... a stool to fix for Anna, a table for the Josias family, and of course the rich farmer Roboam wanted a yoke made for his new team of oxen right now. He could have gone to someone who wasn't so busy, but Joseph's yokes fit so well.

I especially enjoyed working alone with Joseph. He was so patient as he taught me the fine points of his carpentry trade. As we worked, we talked about many things and often the conversation turned to his God. He told me about Abraham and how he believed God and trusted Him to lead him to the Promised Land. He introduced me to Isaac, Jacob and David and told me of how God miraculously divided the Red Sea as He led our ancestors to Israel. Joseph helped me want to be a man just like him — kind, trusting and reliable. He also spoke

# in patience

— Dee Taylor  
Ruthfred Lutheran  
Bethel Park, Pennsylvania

lives of Elizabeth and the baby in her womb.

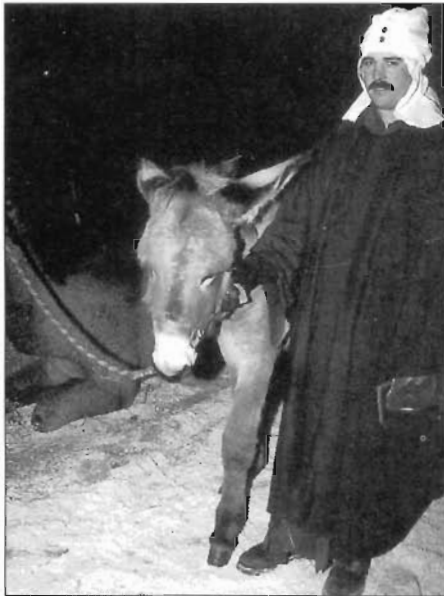
At birth, Elizabeth named her son, John. It was not a family name but prior to his doubt being removed, Zechariah wrote “John” in agreement. John’s name, his Holy Spirit-filled birth, his gift of prophecy in being the forerunner of the promised Messiah, baptizing many into repentance was predestined — evidence that our God blesses us with far more than we ask of Him. God empowered John to prepare the path for the Savior who is the

“Tree of Life” — our only hope for eternal life and continual blessing. Patience through faith is a seed we all need to sow if we are to reap a harvest that will bring honor and glory to God.

Why are many in this world seemingly so determined to grow impatience? It tramples the beautiful path set before us and destroys the very roots of the “Vine” of eternal life that bears fruit in the lives of our children. We’re so faithful in changing the oil in our cars so that one day we can pass the old clunker

down to a child or grandchild. But we are reluctant to change the doubt-filled soil in our hearts to a godly soil of faith, hope, and trust to grow in patience — as Elizabeth did, waiting upon God and His perfect timing. These are the roots we should be passing on from generation to generation.

May God bless us all with peace this holy season in the knowledge of His patience with us and the world we live in!



of the Messiah who was to come. Besides doing work for others, Joseph spent time working on his own home and furnishings. Many times I saw him look up and say, “Thank you, God, for Mary.”

I was invited to their betrothal celebration. Mary’s family, too, was respected in the community, but neither family was wealthy so I’m sure the dowry wasn’t large. The celebration was fun and we had lots of good food. The year following the betrothal was a time of no communication. Mary and her mother were to prepare a trousseaux and the other things the bride would need

for going to her husband’s home.

We heard that Mary left quite suddenly to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country. I later heard that Mary’s older cousin Elizabeth had a son who in later years was called John the Baptist.

Joseph was most lonesome for Mary on the Sabbath when there was no work. One Sabbath day Joseph was asked to read the Scriptures in the synagogue. The scrolls opened to Isaiah 7:14 and he read, “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel, meaning God with us.”

Then one day news spread in Nazareth that Mary had returned home from the hill country. We all noted that she had a rounded abdomen. Joseph told me he contemplated putting her away privately, but being a just man and not wanting to make an example of her, he chose not to.

Joseph later told me how one day when he slept, he was awakened by an angel of the Lord. The angel said, “Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto yourself Mary, your wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost, and she shall bring forth a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save

his people from their sins.” I didn’t understand it all, but I saw the calm steadiness in Joseph’s life that can only come from trust.

Shortly thereafter, Caesar Augustus decreed that all the world should be taxed and accounted for in their hometowns. Joseph and Mary’s city was Bethlehem. They would have to travel the eighty miles in spite of her condition. I gathered goatskins with water, oats, cheese, dried meat, fruit and nuts for the long trip. My job was to care for the donkeys.

With so many travelers on the road, it proved to be an exciting time. I noticed how concerned Joseph was for Mary. He tried to provide every comfort for her.

One night we camped near a small tributary of the Jordan River. I got up early the next morning and caught fish and fried them on an open fire. I picked oranges from a nearby tree and we had a tasty breakfast. Mary was so pleased.

When we neared Bethlehem, I asked for permission to stop off at the shepherd’s field and visit my cousins who were watching their sheep. Mary and Joseph continued on into Bethlehem to find a place to stay.

That night we were awakened by the most brilliant light I’ve ever  
*(continued on next page)*

**A woman who knew true  
submission to God and His Word.**

— Clara Gunderson  
Cambridge, Minnesota



# Giving

“**T**he outcome of my ministry, my calling must be that God is glorified,” said our pastor as he concluded his message. The Apostle Paul put it this way in Galatians 1:24: “And they were glorifying God because of me.”

Mary’s response to finding out what her calling was to be, that of giving birth to the Savior, God’s Son, was to break out in beautiful praise to God; a God she obviously knew as she called Him “God my Savior.”

Every girl in Mexico adores Mary. Aside from those who have placed her in the highest of all positions, even above Jesus, she is revered and honored as the ultimate role model. Because of her, motherhood is admired, hoped for, and highly honored.

I, too, admire Mary and hold her in my thoughts as a woman who knew above all true submission to God and His will. I sense a humble, loving spirit in her words to Gabriel at the end of their conversation as she says, “be it done to me according to your word.”

Though it has been many years, I well remember the joy of carrying my first child. There may not be a whole lot to compare Mary’s Jewish culture and background dating before Christ, and my experience in the 1950s Gentile culture, but I’m sure that like me, as she felt her babe developing, her body changing, there grew in her heart a secret joy and anticipation. Here was a gift, a possession so precious that I felt I was the first and only one to ever experience it! I knew life would never be the same again. Daily life would never be empty — I would always be needed. Days would fill with joy and laughter, hurts and crying, tears to wipe away,

## JOSEPH

seen. An angel appeared with the light and said, “Fear not for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. Today in the city of David a Savior has been born and you shall find him in a manger.” The angel suddenly was joined by a vast host of others who were praising God. You can’t imagine such singing.

The shepherds and I quickly went into Bethlehem and found a baby lying in a manger in one of the local inn’s stable.

You can imagine my surprise when I saw that Mary and Joseph

were the parents! We told everyone we met on our way back to the pasture the good news that the Messiah had come. Joseph had suggested that I go on back to Nazareth and help his father look after things in the shop. He felt it would be best to stay on at Bethlehem so the baby could get a little stronger.

The carpentry shop was a lonely place without Joseph, especially when time passed from weeks to months and then to years.

What a happy day when I heard the commotion outside the shop and heard someone shout that Joseph and his family were seen on the road

coming into Nazareth. Later that day as I was showing Joseph all that we had been doing in the shop, he looked at me and said, “Benjamin, I have learned to put my complete trust in God. While we were still in Bethlehem, an angel told us to flee to Egypt. We were on the road before morning and Jesus is alive today because we did as we were told.”

It was fun to have little Jesus running around in the shop and I knew Joseph was going to do a wonderful job of training Him physically and spiritually as he had me.

Jesus was such a good boy.





# glory to Mary's Lord

knees to bandage, fevers to assuage, songs to sing, bedtime prayers together, neighbors, family and friends to visit to show off my little one's beauty and progress.

Yes, despite the awkward circumstances, Mary's trust in God allowed her to see a greater picture. The song she sang while still at Elizabeth's house is full of Old Testament quotations. She declared openly, "the Mighty One has done great things for me" (Luke 2:49).

Wouldn't she have needed her Lord more than ever at such a time to keep her focused on this calling He had given her? What Scriptures would she have known to help her cope with gossip, criticism and probably even open rejection? Perhaps Psalm 18:24 encouraged her where a confident David wrote, "Therefore the Lord has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in His sight."

Though the angel Gabriel had told her that nothing was impossible with God — not Elizabeth's bearing a child in her advanced age, nor she herself miraculously conceiving a child by the Holy Spirit, she would have needed to lean daily on God's grace, His guidance, His wisdom.

When I was still a child, I sensed God's call to be a missionary. I, too, grew up in a godly home and was taught God's Word, storing up verses and portions that would later become God's rhema (His special Word to me). It is meaningful to me to think that Mary could well have known some of these same verses. Psalm 116:1-2 were the first verses I memorized that I selected for myself. They read, "I love the Lord for He has heard my voice; because He heard the voice of my supplication; therefore, I will call upon Him as long as I live." Psalm 36:9, "In Thy light we see light" helped me understand where to go for help. Isaiah 26:3 kept my focus on trusting the Lord: "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusts in Thee." Mary could have known Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future," and taken them personally as I did, thus, understanding their fulfillment when Gabriel came to her.

Most likely Psalm 139 was in her heart as the Holy Spirit took possession of her tongue to sing beautiful

praises to her Lord. The truths of God's Word were the reason she could so readily respond saying, "here I am, use me." Knowing that God had made her, fashioned her, ordained all her days, she could in turn trust Him to weave within her body a babe of His choosing. When she needed to quiet her soul, she knew where to go.

When I lived in Bolivia and Mexico, the Holy Spirit returned me again and again to Scripture portions, reminding me of my call, my vows, my Lord's care. I was reassured that God understood my mother's heart as I left my children in boarding school; as emergencies at home came up and I wasn't able to be there; as sickness and accidents occurred; as travel was difficult and money short; as government paperwork moved at a snail's pace; as the church responded slowly to what we were there to offer

them. God was leading me to a higher level of trust where I and others, viewing God's faithfulness, would praise Him.

While having trusted God's promises over many years, I still find myself with a very strong will of my own. My stubbornness many times brings me to a point of reasoning with myself like this: "Clara, you know perfectly well that you won't be happy if you keep insisting on your own way. You know there is no contentment when you struggle so against what seems obviously God's way." That is why I marvel so at Mary's immediate acquiesce to God's words to her. And it is also why I think that as time went on, Mary must have needed daily communication with and daily confirmation of God's words to her. If it seems to you that it was too easy for her, remember she was a human being, subject to her own will, but also a woman who was filled with the very Spirit of God. When the Lord speaks to me, showing me His desire, do I have a psalm to sing, a magnificat to praise Him?

Why did God choose Mary? She came from the right lineage, she was born at the right time to fit into God's plans, and surely it was because of her love for Him and willingness to be a part of His plan. Her faith would trust Him through it all. The outcome of Mary's calling brings only glory to her Son's Father — her own Lord.

**"Mary's trust in God allowed her to see a greater picture. The song she sang while still at Elizabeth's house is full of Old Testament quotations. She declared openly, 'The Mighty One has done great things for me.'"**



*a*h, 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*





# Dealing with Christmas stress

**T**he innkeeper missed the Christmas event firsthand because he was so focused on the moment. He was focused on the people coming to town and all the activity that swarmed around him and his inn. How many times do we get so focused on the activities of Christmas that we miss the event? We can be in the midst of the activity but miss the special time that God would have for us because we are busy — too busy.

A few years ago, I realized that our family was trying to keep too many traditions. I was getting frustrated trying to keep up with everything. We had to evaluate what traditions ought to remain and what needed to go for the Christmas season. This relieved a lot of stress.

A Bible study I attended also helped me to evaluate stress and what God says about the subject. During the time we were living in Fort Hood, Texas, when my husband was an Army chaplain, I was privileged to attend our Protestant Women of the Chapel Women's Bible Study each Thursday.

One of our leaders taught a class on stress. She explained that there are two kinds of stress — the good kind, which motivates us to get something accomplished, and the bad kind, which produces anxiety.

Much of her lesson came from Philippians 4:6-9 and focused on eliminating the bad kind of stress which produces anxiety. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you."

We are not to worry about anything but pray about whatever it might be instead. If an anxious thought comes, we are to turn it into prayer. After we pray, God's peace (which we cannot understand) will come to us. God's peace will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Another word for guard is "garrison." It's a military term for

soldiers standing around a fort with their weapons ready. Where does the enemy attack us? It is usually in our thoughts. Isn't it comforting to know that God will be protecting us from those attacks, if we pray? I would rather choose to live in His peace than in frustration. Then the verses go on to say that we need to dwell on the things that are worthy of our thoughts. We can then focus on the true meaning of Christmas. The last verse is the punctuation point. We need to practice these things and God's peace, the true Christmas peace, will come to us.

Consider a special time with God during this Christmas season. Set aside a few extra moments in Bible reading and prayer. You may be surprised at what you can accomplish because it is during these times that God directs us. Focus on our Lord and Savior and He can help you eliminate what is unnecessary for you and your family and help you keep what is necessary to have a wonderful, blessed, special, peaceful Christmas season with Him this year.



Focus  
on what  
matters most

— *Lori Crowell*  
*Arlington,*  
*Washington*

**The innkeeper would never believe that he had just sent God into the cold. And the people would scoff at anyone who told them the Messiah lay in the arms of a teenager on the outskirts of their village. They were all too busy to consider the possibility.**

**Those who missed His Majesty's arrival that night missed it not because of evil acts or malice; no they missed it because they weren't looking.**

**Little has changed in the last two thousand years, has it?**

— *Max Lucado in*  
*God Came Near*

# What the angels teach us about praise

— Barb Schierkolk  
Missionary to Mexico

**“And there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men’” (Luke 2:13-14).**

**W**hether it be a Sunday school program or Handel’s Messiah, I love going to concerts at Christmas time. But I have a feeling that the first and best

Christmas concert ever performed was the angelic one described in Luke 2. The angels’ “Gloria” has been inspiring composers for 2,000 years and the result has been some of the most beautiful music ever created by human beings. What is it about the angels’ song of praise that not only lifts the composer’s pen but the believer’s heart? What can we learn from the angels about praise?

Although this narrative begins with a single angel making the joyful announcement of Jesus’ birth, when the praise begins he is not alone. A multitude of heavenly hosts joins him in worshiping the newborn Savior. The angels teach us that praise is both joyful and powerful in a fellowship. It brings Christians together.

We saw this very clearly two years ago in Mexico. As had been their tradition, our congregation had a week of special nightly events culminating with the Christmas Eve service. One of those nights we invited everyone to our home for an evening of Christmas carols and cookies. Our living room was full to overflowing. As we sang together I was struck by the diversity in that room. Young, old, married, single, educated, uneducated, upper class, lower class; we all praised God together as the body of Christ. It was both powerful and moving.

The power of our praise was not only reflected in the unity of believers but also in the volume of our singing. I’m sure it didn’t quite match that of the angels but our 75 voices definitely entertained our entire neighborhood. For some who stood at their doors and windows listening, it was probably just entertainment, but we pray that for others, the testimony of our praise lifted their hearts. That’s what the angels’ praise did; it lifted the hearts of the shepherds because the object of their praise was God and it testified to the coming of the Savior. The angels teach us that true praise has God alone as its focus.

There is a sad paradox that can be observed in Mexico during the Christmas season. On the one hand, Mexicans are much freer to publicly celebrate Christmas than we are here in the United States. And although Santa Claus’ popularity is growing, he still takes a back seat to the Christ-

mas story. For this reason, beautiful nativity scenes can be seen on display in shopping malls, parks and in many homes. Instead of Santa Claus, for many Mexican children it is the baby Jesus who brings them gifts on Christmas morning. Many neighborhoods, including our own, organize nightly devotions in the weeks prior to Christmas. On the surface the appearance is that God is the focus of their celebration, and yet this is often not the case.

For many Mexicans, baby Jesus, or as they often refer to Him, “the baby God,” never grows up to be their Redeemer and Savior, but is kept in the manger of their nativity scenes to be taken out only at Christmas time. It didn’t take us long to realize that the entire focus of the neighborhood “devotions” was Mary, complete with prayers and songs sung in her honor. Isn’t that heartbreaking? They’ve completely missed the angels’ testimony that God and God alone must be the focus of our praise. If He is not, “praise” quickly becomes idolatry.

One of the things I most look forward to about heaven is hearing with my own ears the songs of the angels. And yet Revelation 5 tells us that we’re not just going to be listening. We will be singing with them, along with all of creation! It will be more than just a song. The angels teach us that praise comes from the depth of our experience of God. The angels praise as ones who know Him as their Creator, and it is breathtaking, but Christians praise Him as ones who also know Christ as their Redeemer. Out of the depth of that relationship comes a song of praise that surpasses even the praise of the angels! I don’t know about you, but that realization inspires me to praise God with all of my heart.

If you were to come to our Sunday school Christmas program in Aguascalientes, it wouldn’t be hard to figure out what the children’s favorite Christmas carol is. It’s called “Navidad” and although it is sung to the tune of “Jingle Bells,” in Spanish, it’s all about Jesus and the story of Christmas. They love this carol and want to sing it over and over again. Every child in our church knows it well, so when they sing it together, just like the angels, it is with great joy and enthusiasm. I expect God smiles when He hears them sing. Let’s praise God together this Christmas with that same joy knowing that our praise is beautiful to Jesus, too.







# Obedient to God's call

— Dan Keinanen  
Good Shepherd  
Lutheran  
Cokato, Minnesota

**"The shepherds knew the value of the birth of Christ. They dropped everything and came to see Jesus."**

I have a hard time relating to the shepherds in the Christmas story. Usually when I hear a story, I can see myself in the place of the character. I think of the parable of the prodigal son. I can relate to wanting to take what is due to me and become frivolous with it. However, I just can't relate to the shepherds. Why? When the Savior of the world had been born, the angels told the shepherds of what had happened. They dropped everything to see the child that had been born. They left their sheep behind and came to worship the newborn Savior, Jesus.

When God asks me to do something or to go somewhere, I become hesitant. This usually happens when God challenges me to witness to someone. I hear the Spirit's call to share the good news and I see the opportunities to share. But I act as though I have better things to do and I need to get those things done. My schedule gets in the way of carrying out the duties of a Christian.

One morning on my way to church I saw a man mowing his lawn. As I drove by I thought that he must not know Christ. If he were a believer, wouldn't he be in church now? I saw the opportunity to share Christ or at least to invite him to church. I kept driving though. I had to get to church. I was scheduled to read Scripture that morning. If I wasn't there people might be concerned. Have we become too concerned about how our church is run, rather than concerned with why it runs? Isn't the purpose of the church to equip the believers so that we can share the good news with people by the power of the Holy Spirit? I don't know if stopping to talk to that man would have helped, but I know that being obedient to the Spirit's call is important. The shepherds knew the value of the birth of Christ. They dropped everything and came to see Jesus.

In the beginning of last November, I was asked to be the special guest speaker at the Ruthfred Lutheran Church youth fall retreat. We went to Seneca Hills in the upper northwest part of Pennsylvania. The Spirit was challenging hearts to repent and come back to Christ. Many hearts responded to that call. I saw the obedience of God's people to His call. In our last session we talked about giving our all to Christ, not holding back anything. In a sense it was a call to become like the shepherds and just simply follow Christ. Again, many hearts responded, and the youth of Ruthfred Church



returned to Pittsburgh that afternoon a changed group. What a great example to me of how God's people should respond.

I think of Abraham in the Old Testament. God called out, "Abraham." Without knowing what God was even going to ask, Abraham responded, "Here am I Lord." What true obedience Abraham had. Just like Abraham the students of Ruthfred said, "Here I am Lord." What stops you from responding in that way?

The shepherds were very selfless. Again, I can't relate to that very often. I find myself being so selfish. I want to see my own kingdom done. The things that I enjoy become more important than building up God's Kingdom.

I want to be like Paul and consider all things that were once gain to me nothing but rubbish. We become so self-centered that we can't see the need of every soul in our own back yard. Jesus told us to see others as more important than ourselves. We need to put on spiritual eyes, and have spiritual ears to see and hear the cry of a lost people. They are looking for something, and we have the greatest thing to give them, Jesus. Jesus will save them and give them life. In order to do that, we must put aside our selfish ways and become like the shepherds.

God has blessed me in many different ways throughout my life. My parents have been such a great influence on me. Even though they might not know it, they are a picture to me of who Christ is. Both of my sisters mean a lot to me. I might not have gotten along with them growing up, but I have learned to appreciate them, and to love them. I was blessed richly at Bible school where godly men taught me God's holy Word. I had the opportunity to visit almost all of the AFLC congregations as an Ambassador team member, and saw God's work throughout the Association. However, I am willing to trade all of that this Christmas, so that I can follow Christ wholeheartedly. I want to give Him my all, and hold nothing back. Can you relate to that this Christmas season?





# Remember the gift and share

— Tamba Abel  
Campo Grande, Brazil

**C**hristmas is a time for remembering the gift of Jesus to us. It's also a time for us to worship Him through our giving, as the Magi did when they traveled from far away to bring Him their special gifts. When we share some of the blessings He has bestowed on us, it is an offering of worship. Sometimes it is not possible to give such elaborate gifts, but giving in the ways we are able to, whether in actual gifts, or perhaps just giving of ourselves — our time, a favor, a visit, a phone call or a special card, are all means that we can use to bless someone when we do it as unto the Lord.

Giving is a way of showing honor and bringing happiness to someone. In true giving, nothing is expected in return. It is even more noble when it is done sacrificially, as Jesus did for us on the cross.

Christmas time is a joyful time in our church here in Campo Grande, Brazil. Even though the medium income is \$75 a month, people have found ways of giving with joy and thanksgiving. It all started a few years ago, in an effort to unite our congregation as a family and reach out to unsaved family members or neighbors. We have a secret friend drawing that involves sending encouraging messages to our "secret friend" for a few weeks, followed by a special potluck and revelation day at church, where we present our friend with a simple, nevertheless, real gift; perhaps the only gift the adults receive at all.

The rule is that the gift cannot be above \$1.99. You would be amazed at what people have found for that price, such as a silver-plated trinket box from China.

The best part of the program is watching families sitting together with the dear person they invited along, often an unsaved, lonely relative or neighbor. While each person describes his or her secret friend, everyone tries guessing who the person is, and then guessing what the gift is before it finally is opened. All this commotion in guessing and laughter; this giving and reaching out to someone who otherwise might go ignored, is shared by all.

This may sound all too familiar to Americans who celebrate Christmas in a somewhat traditional way, but for Brazilians celebrating it this way is an unforgettable experience, because they don't have a gift exchange in their own homes but rather, a special late-night dinner. So naturally, those visiting are touched because they feel welcomed and included. Doors are opened for us to minister to them with the saving gospel.

The sight of relatives and friends' faces beaming with delight and the twinkle in the children's eyes in participating is one that we hope to witness many times. It reassures us that the act of giving is indeed self-rewarding, and above all, the real message of Jesus' birth is proclaimed with the prayer that their hearts will be opened to receive the greatest gift of all: Jesus!



# What are you waiting for?

— Pastor Wes Langaas  
Abundant Life Lutheran  
Thief River Falls, Minnesota

**A**nticipation and excitement dominate the thoughts of children (and adults) as Christmas nears. Adults get caught up in the excitement simply by watching the children. Unfortunately, many adults are waiting for it to be over.

Luke tells us of Simeon who “was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him” (Luke 2:25-35). Simeon knew what he was waiting for because the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die before seeing the Messiah, the hope of Israel and of the world.

Simeon’s hope was focused on Christ as the “consolation of Israel,” which embraced the entire messianic hope. This was based on promises such as Isaiah 40:1-2, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God ... That her iniquity has been removed.”

Man without God is without comfort and without hope. Apart from the grace of God that appeared in the Messiah, we continue to struggle under the curse of sin and all its ugly effects. Apart from the grace of God that appeared in Christ, we remain “lost and condemned creatures” who need the “consolation of Israel.” Christ is our consolation and hope. When Simeon saw Jesus, he knew that the promise had been kept and his hope had been realized.

Simeon’s words to Mary and Joseph indicate that this consolation and hope involved more than the mere arrival of a baby. This is a good word for us to keep in mind at Christmas, too. It is easy to love a baby, but when this baby grew up he was not always so “loved.”

Simeon says, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed — and a sword will pierce even your own soul — to the end that thoughts from many hearts will be revealed” (v 34-35).

That prophecy of consolation and hope unfolded as Jesus saw the multitudes as lost sheep, felt compassion for them (Matthew 9:36) and met their needs of body and soul. His words

exposed the thoughts and intentions of their hearts and gave life to those who believed in him. He met the false accusations of his enemies (Matthew 26:59, 60) and He was rejected by His own people (Matthew 27:22). He was “pierced for our transgressions ... and by His scourging we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). That word of the cross is God’s consolation and hope for the sinner. Simeon waited and received a:

## *Future Hope*

God’s Word gives hope for the future. By faith in God’s Word, Simeon lived to see the Lord’s salvation and his future hope was secured in Christ, our hope of glory. Not everyone has that future hope, or hope of anything. Too late we say of someone: “He had so much to live for.” Or maybe even worse, we say, “He had nothing to live for.” What do you have to live for that gives you hope? Simeon’s future and eternal hope was realized as he embraced Jesus.

## *Living Faith*

God promised and Simeon believed and now he literally held the promise of God in his arms. Our trouble is not with God’s promises, but with our faith. A living faith takes hold of Christ, or “takes Him to heart.” Then we know as the hymn says, “’Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, just to take Him at his word.” When we fail to take Him at His Word, faith dies and hope fades.

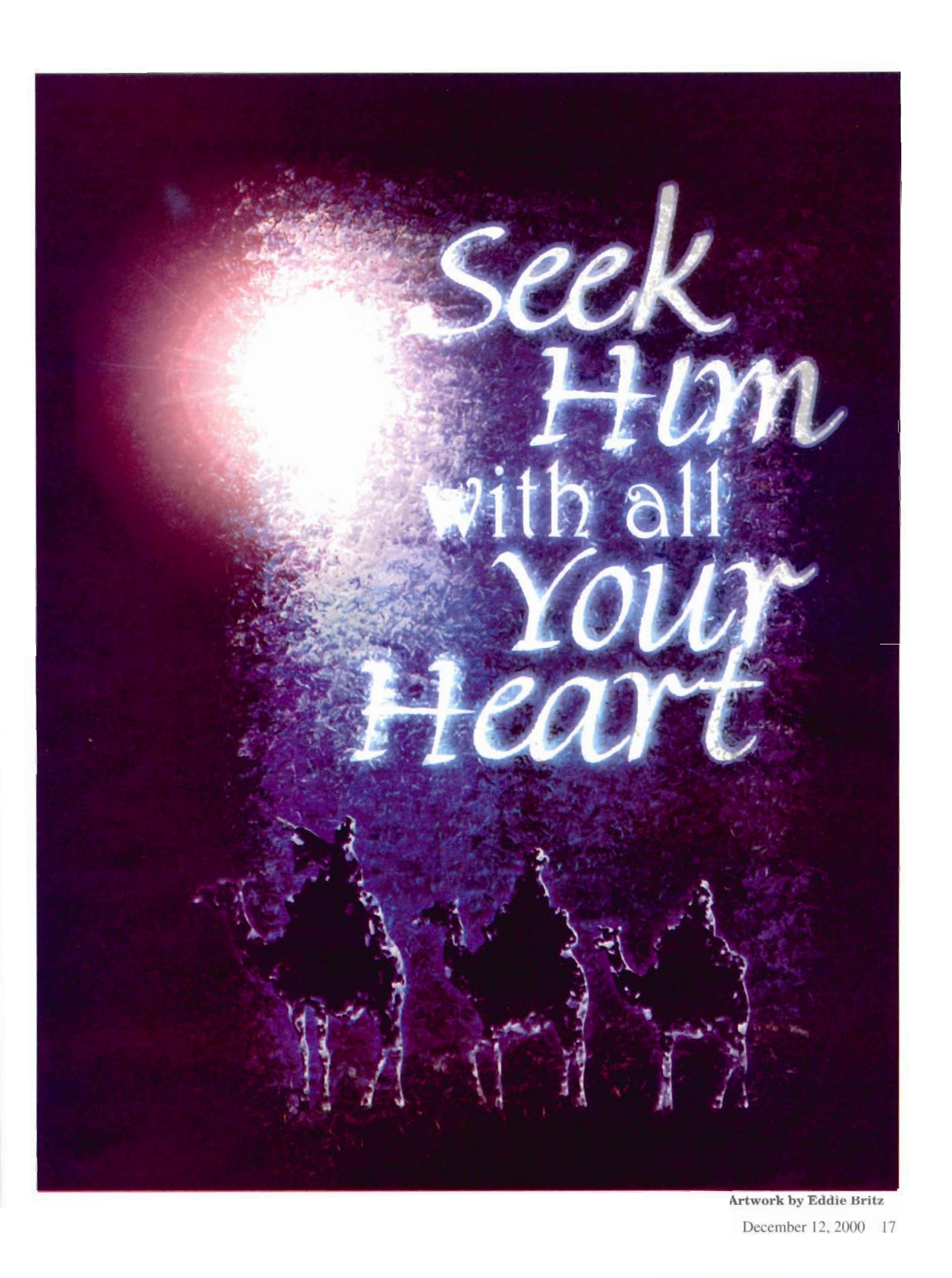
## *Personal Salvation*

We talk about personal faith and salvation. God’s gifts of faith and salvation are personal, but those gifts are grounded in the prophetic Word that embraces all believers. Simeon says, “My eyes have seen” (v 30). This promise was a personal promise for Simeon, but it was also the promise to Israel and to all the world. Not all Israel had seen it yet, but Simeon had, and that was a start. Now having seen “the consolation of Israel,” Simeon was ready to “depart in peace” (v 29). What a wonderful testimony of a saint waiting to enter into the hope of glory! For Simeon, this “Christmas” wasn’t over, it was just beginning.

What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for something that is already here but you just haven’t seen it yet? Ask God to “open your eyes that you might see wonderful things” in His Word (Psalm 119:18). Then the Holy Spirit will do for you as He did for Simeon. He will open your eyes to see Jesus, your eternal consolation and hope.







Seek  
Him  
with all  
Your  
Heart



Artwork by Eddie Britz

December 12, 2000 17



# The nail on the wall

— by Einar Syltessaeter

**K**ore (may be pronounced as Corey) came dejectedly into the kitchen. "Do you know, Mother, that Lars, Petter, Jan and Nils are going to get new suits for Christmas? Can't I get a new suit for Christmas also, Mother?"

"Yes, my boy, you certainly could use one. The one you have is both worn and old, but you know we don't have much to do with since Father left us." Helene, his mother, had a far-off look in her eyes and a tear moved down her cheek. She lived it all over again. The storm and the anguish that the worst was going to happen — and the pastor coming out in the afternoon to tell that "the worst had happened."

Kore didn't say anything more. He was used to having to give up so many things because they couldn't afford them. In reality, there wasn't anything he could do to help. He knew that Mother did all she could for her boy and really he had it very good. Sure, it was hard to hear his schoolmates' sarcastic words because his clothing wasn't as up-to-date as theirs, but he knew that the teacher understood his situation. When it came to schoolwork, he was among the best.

He went out again to play and didn't think so much about the suit. But Mother Helene thought about it. Yes, she had to go out to her secret chamber — the chopping block in the woodshed and talk with Him who is the widow's defender and the orphan's father. "Lord, help me to lay as many 'kroner' aside that Kore can get his suit for Christmas."

She had moved into town to find work. It had already been six years since her husband had died. Once again the sorrow gripped her heart strongly. Again she saw before her Lennart, her husband, the last morning he lived. It was difficult for him to tear himself away from the crib where Kore lay. Again she saw him turn in the doorway. "I don't like the weather today, Helene, but you know we

have to try." She saw him once more set out from land and set his course through the channel. That was the last time. Yes, was it that?

No, God be praised. One day they will meet again. Quietly she quoted, "And the sea gave up the dead in it." Glorious promise, she said to herself, and took up the work of washing up.

Two Sundays before Christmas, Kore had been to Sunday school. Mother saw that he had something extra on his mind because the meatballs were being eaten almost mechanically. That wasn't like Kore. He enjoyed food. He could praise it and Mother's way of cooking. But

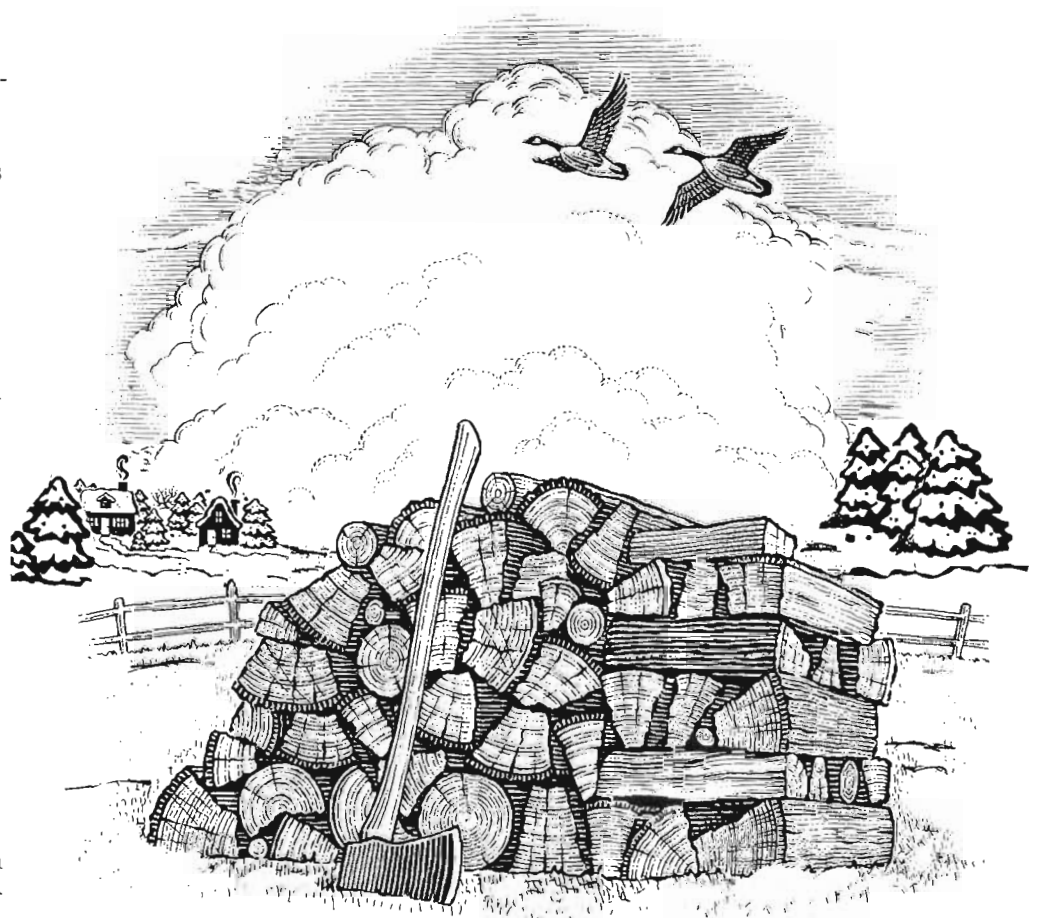
this day there was none of that. Together with the last bite of meatball came the question, "Mother, is it true that if we believe in Jesus we can pray for what we want?"

"Yes, my boy, that is true enough. But why do you ask about that?"

"Well, for that's what Larssen said in Sunday school today. So that is really true then, Mother? You must have prayed often, Mother, especially since — that with Father."

Kore had never been able to remember his father, but his mother had told him everything. "So it is alright to ask Jesus for a new suit for Christmas?"

It was difficult for Mother to



answer yes. To be sure she had already been able to lay aside some kroner and she had, so to say, been to the “chopping block” and put the matter before the One in heaven, but could she answer a complete and full yes? She could do no other. As a matter of course she had to say yes. She glanced at the box with the money up in the cupboard and said, “Yes, if only you pray, Kore.”

When the last spoonful of sago soup with three prunes in hand went down, Kore went out the door.

By the chopping block in the woodshed lay a little boy on his knees. The words were a child’s but firm as a mountain. “Dear Jesus, at Sunday school today Larssen said that it is alright to ask you about everything. I would so like to get a suit for Christmas, but Mother doesn’t have enough money. I depend on this that You, Jesus, will give me a new suit. It is soon enough if I get it Christmas Eve. Amen.”

Kore rose from the chopping block, went in to Mother and said, “It is arranged now, Mother.”

“What is arranged?” asked Mother, full of wonder.

“It’s in order about the suit. I have told Jesus about this and prayed for a new suit for Christmas, so you don’t have to think any more about it.”

Then came fourteen conflict-filled days for Helene. She also prayed but couldn’t get herself to say as Kore had: “It is in the Word.”

“Oh, what a difference between Kore’s faith and mine,” she said to herself.

Her prayer took this form: “Lord help me, help me to get enough money so that Kore won’t be disappointed.” But there didn’t get to be enough, and now Christmas Eve had come. Everyone dashed about in joy and delight to get everything ready. A great peaceful Christmas mood lay over the little western Norway town. Only in Helene’s chest was there conflict — yes, panic. How was she to get out of this?

The last time she counted the money in the box, there was far from enough money for the suit. Kore went out on the steps a couple times. Shouldn’t the suit be coming soon?

Yes, where was it really going to come from? From Jesus Himself, Kore said to himself, and went inside.

“Mother, I think I will go to bed. You know that we are going to church in the morning, and I will have a new suit.” Mother had to turn away, but answered, “Yes, do that Kore. You have already received many Christmas presents.”

But first he went out to the woodshed and came in with the hammer and a nail. “Dear Kore, what do you want with the hammer and a nail this late on Christmas Eve?”

“Well, Mama, you realize that Jesus must find something to hang the suit on when He comes.” And then he held the nail in the wall about his bed, pounded it in, undressed, prayed his nighttime prayer and slept.

The storm between doubt and faith raged in Mother’s heart. Once more she had to go out to the woodshed and pour out her heart before God. There was prayer for forgiveness for unbelief and doubt and at the end she had to capitulate and say, “Lord Jesus, don’t disappoint my boy! You must do this in Your way.”

She knelt long by the chopping block, so long that she began to get chilled. When she came in to the bedroom again, she found Kore in confident and peaceful sleep with the nail in the wall.

Suddenly there was a knock

**“Kore rose from the chopping block, went in to mother and said, ‘It is arranged now, mother.’”**

on the door and in came one of the town’s seamstresses. She was only going to deliver a package from the wife of merchant N. N., the mother of Kore’s three companions who were all going to get new suits for Christmas.

“You understand that when I came to deliver the suits tonight, it became apparent that the suit for Jan was way too small. There was no way it would fit and it simply had been sewed from a pattern completely different from the one I had made from the boy. I was desperate, but the storekeeper’s wife was so understanding and suddenly said, “Now I have thought of something; my boys play together with the son of the widow in Vika. He son is somewhat smaller than Jan and the suit is certain to fit him.”

The suit was packed up again and the seamstress was asked to go over to the street where Kore lived and deliver it with the above explanation to Mother Helene.

With trembling hands, but with a heart which rejoiced in thanks to Him Who said, “Unless you become as children,” she hung the suit on the nail.

Christmas morning Kore was on his way to church together with Mother, but at the dinner table he said, “Did you see that everything was arranged?”

Yes, Mother saw that and experienced a Christmas that renewed her faith.



— from *Fiskerens Venn*  
translated from Norwegian  
by Pastor Raynard Huglen,  
Newfolden, Minnesota

(Note: the original title for the story was “Kaare’s Firm Faith Was Not Put to Shame.”)

# The little red comb



**A Sunday school teacher's Christmas gift**

— Lois Hupp  
Faith Lutheran  
Ottawa, Illinois

Each Christmas season Sunday school teachers scramble to find just the right token of love to honor Jesus' birthday and delight their students. Many are doing it again this year or like me, have done it in the past. It's a job that takes serious pondering and it's one that is wrapped with the hope that Jesus Christ will be the true focus of the Sunday school festivities.

Several years ago a "little red comb" was among the Christmas gifts that our son received from his Sunday school teacher. Now if anyone has ever shopped for boys, they know that finding useful, meaningful and well-received gifts is not an easy task. However, a plastic red comb with the words, "JESUS loves you" in white lettering, happened to be a teacher's gift that came into our home. It became all that the teacher had hoped. The comb declared the love of Jesus. It was well received and used daily. Not only was its message meaningful to our Brian, but also to the housekeeper — me! I would always smile as I placed it back on the shelf when Brian went to college. (Home is home because certain things always await your return.)

Mysteries of all mysteries, last year the "little red comb" ended up on a new shelf far from our home. That red comb happened to be the only physical "tool of comfort" that I could find as I searched my purse standing beside my father's bedside in a trauma unit in an Iowa hospital. I could offer him nothing as the ventilator did his breathing, the intravenous tubes provided all his nutrition and the arm restraints stopped his normal movements.

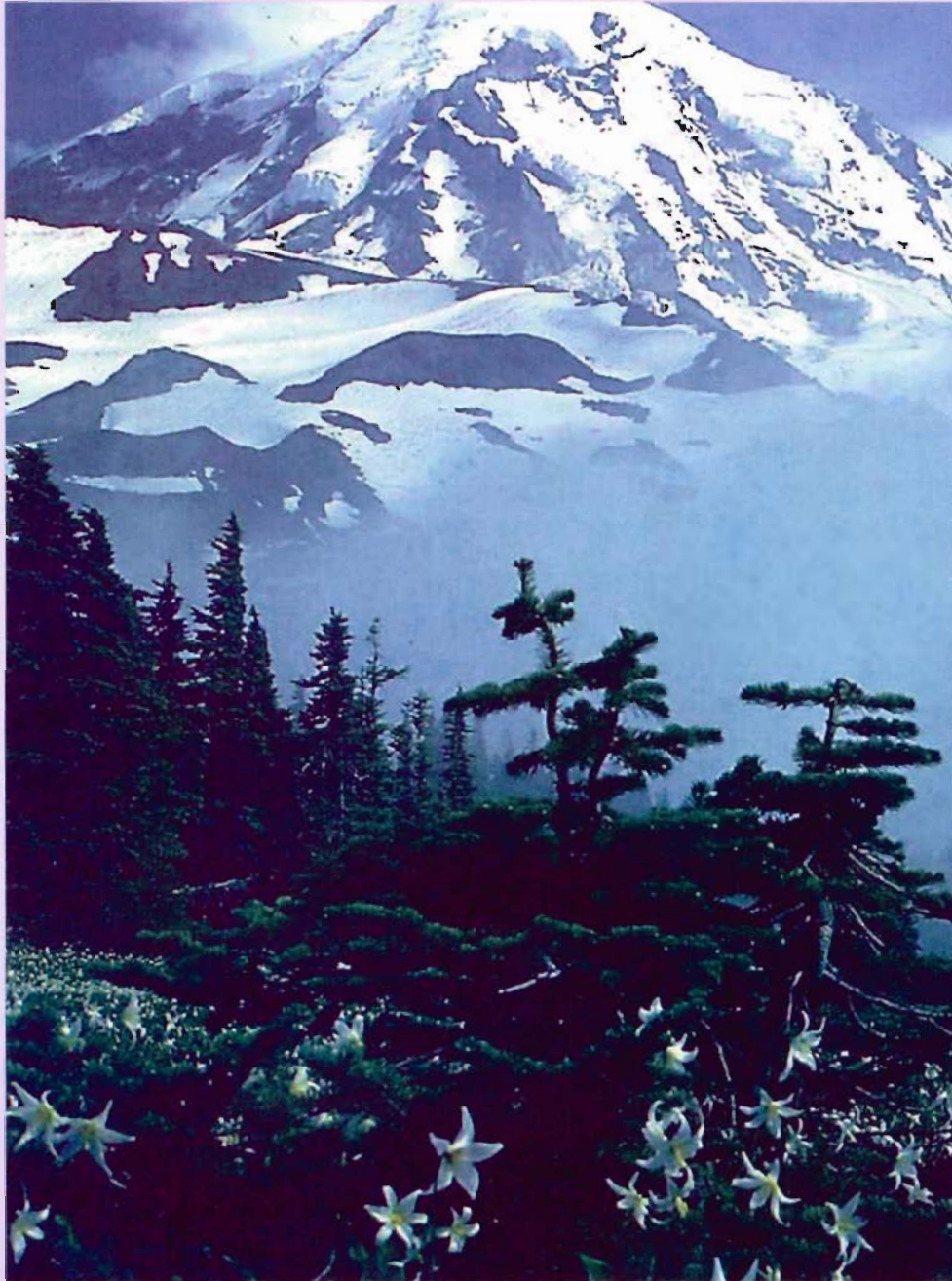
I was helpless to offer physical comfort. But that little red comb stroked through his soft gray hair, and the words "Jesus Loves You" filled my heart with a contentment that thrills God himself. During those days I placed the red comb on a new shelf, this one above my father's bed. And to God be the glory, from this new shelf it gave its testimony to all who cared for my father. And it gave the greatest of comfort to my mother, my sister and brother, and the five grandchildren who attempted to comfort him. (It's interesting to note that I don't recall placing that comb in my purse, but the Lord knew we needed it there and not on the shelf in the bathroom.)

A Sunday school teacher never knows how God will choose to use a Christmas gift. But the little red comb proves that when a present is given with the love of Jesus attached, and proclaims His love, God can use it in the most unique way!

In Isaiah 55:11 God's Word tells us "So is my word ... It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." I think of the verse often and now know that a gift proclaiming "Jesus loves you" can also achieve the purpose for which it is sent.







**Go tell it  
on the  
mountain,  
over the  
hills and  
everywhere;  
go tell it  
on the  
mountain  
that Jesus  
Christ is  
born!**

— *Ambassador Hymnal* No. 44

# Christmases past

— Helen Knapp  
Maranatha Free Lutheran  
Willmar, Minnesota

**M**y first recollection of the special holiday to celebrate Jesus' birth is when I was three or four years old.

That year it was our turn to have the Yule Eve at our home and I was excited in anticipation of opening presents from under the tree. But first was the delicious meal of lute-fisk, lefse, potatoes, peas, meatballs, flat bread, fresh bread, butter, jellies, jams, and jells. And of course, we had a lunch at the close of the evening with rummegrøt, coffee, and an endless variety of cookies. The cookies came in various shapes, carefully frosted. There were cakes, fattigman, krumkake, rosettes, sandbakkels, kringle, and julekake. I wanted to eat a bit of everything but my tummy could stretch only so far.

What made the evening memorable was this: my childhood home was a small, four-room abode. The two bedrooms were large enough for a bed, dresser, and curtained closet. The living room was the size of the two bedrooms and it housed my father's rocker, a divan, my mother's sewing machine, the coal heater and the Benson Corner telephone exchange (switchboard we called it). The kitchen was a very busy place this evening and there wasn't much space with the table having been enlarged as much as possible to seat 10 people. I was not welcome under foot! "Train up a child in the way he should go" was exercised and I was held secure between my father's knees as he sat in his rocker. I cried the whole time as I watched the preparations going on in the kitchen by my mother, aunt and three cousins, and Grandmother Johnson. Daddy, uncle, and male cousin enjoyed their visiting, ignoring my wailing.

Many, many Christmas Eves were enjoyed at our aunt and uncle's home. I especially remember the tree with the candles lit, reflecting merrily in the window. After the scrumptious meal, the dishes had to be done. Oh, what a pain for a child

not old enough to help but old enough to be excited about the gifts under the tree.

With the kitchen finally in order, we would sit down to read from Luke the wondrous and mysterious story of the shepherds, sheep, the stars and the angels who sang the good news. Joseph and Mary were housed with the animals, a warm shelter from the winter winds. Jesus was born there, our Savior from sin and eternal death. We sang the familiar hymns with pump organ accompaniment. Some of us had poems we recited from the church and school programs we had taken part in. The



solemnity of our family program is still poignant in my mind and a cherished part of my life.

And yes, our attention then turned to those brightly wrapped gifts that held wondrous and beautiful things. As the youngest I usually delivered the gifts as an older cousin told me who to take them to — what an important task for a child impatient with the seemingly endless kitchen chores before the joyous time of Christmas Eve.

One Christmas Eve our two families were kept at home by a blizzard. The next day was very cold, bright and sunny. Uncle came

for us with the horses and sleigh for a ride across the fields, sleigh bells jingling as we rode over the hard-packed pristine snow. The horse blankets kept us warm as we sat in the clean straw. The air was crisp and tickled our air passages.

Some years later my husband and children and I found ourselves trying to celebrate Jesus' birthday in a hot climate! We were in Brazil as missionaries, teaching the true "Reason for the Season." Instead of snow, it was heat. There were no pine trees available. We took a tree branch, set it in a stand, put some cotton on for snow and some colorful paper rings the children made. In later years fir trees were available. Our first Christmas in Brazil the children had gifts from the grandparents which we had brought with us. Usually money was sent to purchase gifts.

One year we chose not to exchange gifts with each other in our immediate family. We pooled our money and invited a poor family to come and dine with us. Afterwards we presented them each with a gift. We remember this different Christmas and it warms our hearts. The small boy in the family pounced on his gift, gleefully tearing off the wrapping with gusto. We can still hear his shout of joy over the plastic jeep. A few years later the children were orphaned and became our son and daughter.

Time moves on. Seven of the family members I first celebrated Christmas with have moved on to their eternal rest. Our children married and new ways of celebrating evolved. I'm thankful for my "Christmases Past" and look forward to meeting Jesus whose birthday I've celebrated for 71 years. Maybe there will be a few more before that reunion in heaven. Second Timothy 1:12 says, "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."



## It's about what He paid

The front page of the catalogue encourages you to "Celebrate the True Meaning of Christmas." Something they feel can help you to do that is the life-size nativity set you can purchase. Each piece is "finely detailed, exquisitely colored, ... hand cast, hand painted." It is described as appropriate for "churches, schools, hospitals, homes, parks, shopping centers, stores, etc." The complete 20-piece set can be yours for only \$28,075.00.

I do not expect to ever be featured on "The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." If I happen to go out to eat, it's usually to the type of place where the question is asked, "Would you like fries with that?" Because of my lack of exposure to high price living, maybe I'm just not aware of the average price of nativity sets. Still, \$28,075 seems like a lot of money for a church that is called to serve the poor, a school that is to educate the young, a hospital that is to care for the sick, or any group or individual to spend on a nativity set.

But sadly, Christmas has become for many, more about what they pay than about what He paid.

Some in the retail sector have expressed concern that consumer spending may go down this Christmas season as compared to last year. It is said this could cause problems throughout our economy. It appears some believe we will be in serious trouble if people do not continue to buy a great deal of stuff they do not need. Are they claiming the health of our economy is based on wasteful consumer spending?

Spending money is very much a part of the Christmas season. Sometimes the spending is done in an attempt to deal with guilt. A person maybe hasn't given a child, friend or relative a great deal of time during the year. They have been consumed with their own interests. Then Christmas rolls around and they get even busier than usual. What to do about the failure to give a loved one some time? Buy a gift. Spend a lot of money.

But no matter how much we pay the guilt remains.

Some spending may be done in an attempt to demonstrate or buy spirituality. The thought may be, "Folks will be convinced I'm a real Christian if I buy that fancy nativity scene;" or, "I'll give evidence of my devotion by putting up the right kind of decorations." Nativity sets and decorations can be nice, but Jesus

said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35, NIV).

Numerous requests for money come this time of year. The causes are often great places to put our money — sometimes a better use of it than some of the gifts we buy. The motivation for our giving needs to be considered, however. Are we giving money hoping this will make up for the bad things we have done during the year? Do we think that if we spend enough on these worthy causes God will be happy with us, at least for a while?

Christmas can so easily become about what we spend. The heart of Christmas is then lost, for the central message is what Jesus spent.

Some of what He spent is described in Philippians 2:6-8: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found

in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!"

Jesus gave up the glory and comfort of heaven for a manger in Bethlehem. I do not expect it was "finely detailed, exquisitely colored."

People try to buy beauty and majesty. Jesus had it and gave it up when He came to earth. "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and

familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Isaiah 53:2, 3, NIV).

He gave up being served to become a Servant. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45, NIV).

Our expenditures, no matter how great they may be, no matter how worthy the cause, or how elegant the gift, cannot take away our guilt or make us right with God. But that can happen because of what Jesus spent. "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5, NIV).

Do not let the world fool you into thinking your spending can determine whether or not Christmas is joyful or meaningful. Focus on what Jesus spent. And have a wonderful Christmas with Him.

—Pastor Craig Johnson

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## SOMETHING TO SHARE

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### A lesson at the feeder: The evergreen

**A**longside the bird feeder stands a stately evergreen. The birds rely on it year 'round for a variety of reasons. It's a refuge from sharp biting winds in spring and winter and offers cooling shade in the summer. It provides safety from predators. But it also provides a splendid perch. After feeding, birds will light on its branches, chirping or singing in praise for their food.

It is interesting to observe how each bird has a different preference for perching on this tree. Some prefer the safety of the inner branch, some sit directly across from the feeder, while others fly to the opposite side. Still others fly to the higher branches. But the most interesting has been our flock of goldfinches. This small flock of sixteen comes to the feeder and after eating, they fly into the evergreen. They like to perch on the very ends of the branches, facing out to show off their brilliant yellow chests. They also spread throughout the tree from bottom to top and when they've all settled it looks like a tree trimmed for Christmas with yellow candles on the boughs.

One winter's night, Martin Luther was walking outside and saw the beauty of a fir tree as the stars sparkled through its branches. He brought the tree inside, decorated its limbs with small candles and then called his children to gather

around the tree to enjoy. Since that time, the evergreen tree has been one of the most recognizable symbols of Christmas.

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government shall be on His shoulders. And He shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:2,6). Just as that tree was brought into the house to bear light, so has God sent His son in to our darkness to be our light. The fir tree (tannenbaum) symbolizes God as unchanging and everlasting. Always green and vibrant with life, this tree provides tranquility and safety throughout the stresses of the seasons, a balm from pressures and a perch to exult in life. The German carol includes these words:

O tannenbaum, O tannenbaum,  
You come from God, eternal ...

A symbol of the Lord of love  
Whom God to man sent  
from above ....

O tannenbaum, O tannenbaum,  
You speak of God, unchanging.

You tell us all to faithful be,  
And trust in God eternally.

Every eye is drawn to the decorated tree at Christmas. In the darkened room the tree shimmers with

light which permeates throughout the room, touching everything. The wonder of the light touches and warms everyone and everything present. Often the tree is placed in front of the window allowing its light to spread into the outer darkness, drawing others to its light.

Ephesians 5:8 says, "For you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light." Jesus, the Light sent to us, was to model his Father. Like the light reaching out from the evergreen, the love of the Father flows out of Jesus, His Son. Through this constant love we know the security of an eternal, unchanging Godhead. His love reaches into all the recesses of our human experiences; offering a Counselor for difficult times, hope for our uncertainties, a Comforter in our sorrows. And underlying is the joy of knowing the Light. Let in the Light. Let it permeate your life, filling it with life and love. Then share the Light with others.



— Mary Christenson  
Calvary Free Lutheran  
Fergus Falls, Minnesota