

The Lutheran AMBASSADOR

December 14, 1999

*Let
the
spirit
of*



*CHRISTMAS
enter in*

THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

December 14, 1999
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AN ENCOURAGING WORD

The happy Christmas

As it has been for centuries, Christmas 1999 will be a worldwide celebration. It is a wonderful time, a happy time. We celebrate the birth of God's Son, Jesus. There is a hymn that has been going through my mind. The words of the first verse go like this:

"The happy Christmas
comes once more,
The heavenly guest
is at the door,
The blessed words the
shepherds thrill,
The joyous tidings,
"Peace, good will."

It is nearly two thousand years since that lowly birth in a stable in Bethlehem. The only ones to greet Him that night were a young couple, the shepherds and perhaps a few animals. It was as lowly as a birth place could be: "the heavenly guest was at the door." He was at the door of the world, sent by the Father to procure and give the gift of life.

A baby with such a great task to complete? Yes, a baby, but He was the Son of God. He was the promised Son of God. He was the one of whom the prophets had spoken. Now the angels were announcing His birth to shepherds on a cold, wintry night there on the hillsides of Bethlehem.

His years as a young boy were in many respects like that of any other boy, but yet so very different. At the age of twelve He knew He must be about His Father's business. He began His ministry without even a place to call his own. The marketplace of small villages and towns, a sick room where someone had died, the hillside where people were hungry, a fisherman's boat, a well in Samaria, and a tree in Jeri-

cho were some of the places where He went. His schedule and appointments were arranged by His Father. And wherever He went "the heavenly guest was at the door."

Another door to which he often went was the door to His Father. He opened that door with prayer. Sometimes it was right in the midst of a miracle, sometimes it was alone up in the hills, or in the garden of Gethsemane, and finally on a cross. "The heavenly guest was at that door" seeking the will of His Father. He is still there today on our behalf.

As He lives today He still seeks doors where He can find entrance. The doors of churches, homes, schools, hospitals and of shops and stores.

But His one purpose in coming into these places is that He might stand before the doors of our hearts, knocking and waiting to be invited in, to take residence, to come in as Friend, King, Lord and Savior. For that purpose His Father sent Him as a baby, as a teacher, as a miracle worker and as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind. Yes "the heavenly guest is at the door." Have you opened your heart's door to Him? If you haven't, do so today. Then you too will have the *happiness of Christmas*, the gift that lasts for this life and for eternity.



— **Pastor Elden Nelson**
Maranatha Free Lutheran
Willmar, Minnesota



The Word became flesh



— Pastor Robert L. Lee
President of the
Association Free
Lutheran Congregations

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him; and without Him was not anything made that has been made. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. ... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-4,14).

This is the verse of Scripture that stands above the head of the instructors in our main seminary classroom: **The Word became flesh.** It was also the school motto of the institution to which the seminary traces its roots. Luther chose these words for one of his most memorable Christmas sermons, and calls it the most important gospel lesson of the church year. One would have to search long and hard indeed to find a more appropriate text for the season.

The Word. This is Christ's first title of honor in the Gospel. We are carried back to the first chapter of the book of Genesis, where God spoke and all things were created. There is a wonderful unity as well as continuity in the Bible, for the Christ Whom we meet in the New Testament was present in the Old. **In the beginning was the Word.**

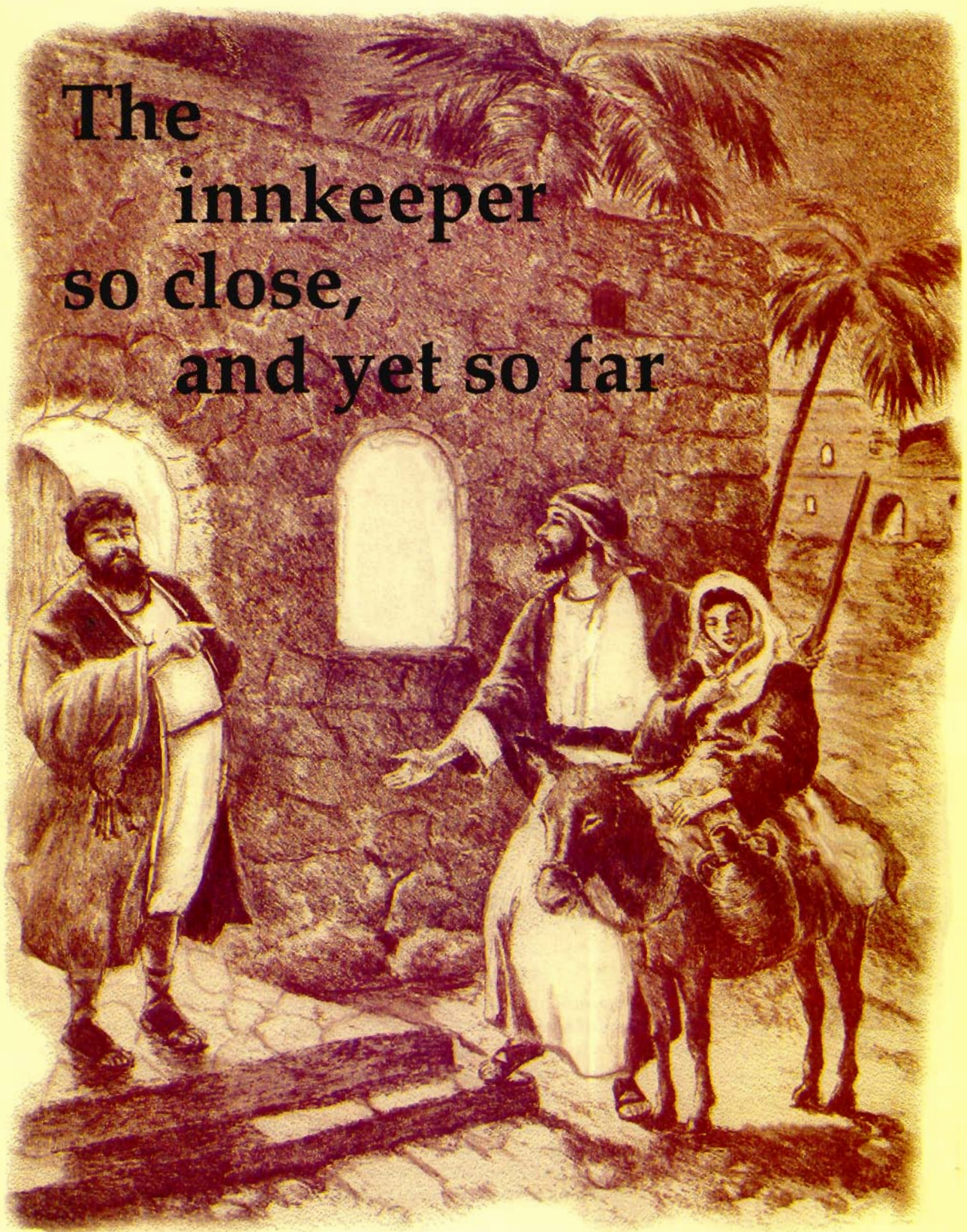
Became flesh. Christmas is not about trees and tinsel, garlands and gifts. The Incarnation (becoming flesh) of God in Jesus Christ is the reason for the season. He took our form and was made in our likeness, that He might perfectly keep the law in our place and die the death that we deserved as punishment for sin.

The Word was God ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us! In the Incarnation we are confronted with a mystery that is too great for reason to comprehend. His name is the name that is above all names. It is only fitting that we worship Him with praise and thanksgiving; not only at Christmas time, but all the days of our lives.

A joyous Christmas and best wishes to you in Christ from our AFLC family of ministries!



The
innkeeper
so close,
and yet so far



— Pastor
Chuck Sampson
Newark Lutheran
Newark, Illinois

Despite what the world tells us, Christmas is not a season for giving. Rather, it is a season, a time for receiving — receiving the most important gift ever given. During this Christmas season millions of people will wrap gifts, enjoy family gatherings, sing carols, and even sit in church pews. Yet they will not receive the gift of forgiveness of sins and assurance of eternal life through Christ Jesus.

Think of the innkeeper at Bethlehem. He was physically close to the newborn King, but still he missed his opportunity to worship and to rejoice. Perhaps he had no expectation of the fulfillment of God's promises made through the prophets. Perhaps he had no awareness of his own need for forgiveness.

Are things really that much different for many people living today? Consider Jesus' words in Matthew 24:37-39: "For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man."

What are your needs this Christmas season? What are your expectations? Nearly fifteen years ago I was having difficulty completing my sermon for Christmas Eve. Several days before Christmas I was awakened at 5:00 a.m. I felt the Lord leading me to walk over to my office and complete my sermon. As I entered the office the words "Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown when Thou camest to earth for me" came into my mind. I felt that the Lord wanted that hymn sung on Christmas Eve, and I remember thinking, "But that's not a Christmas hymn." And then I remembered the rest of the words: "But in Bethlehem's home there was found no room for Thy holy nativity. O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee!"

My sermon was soon completed. As we sang that hymn on Christmas Eve, I wondered who it was that our Lord wanted to have the opportunity to sing those words: "Come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee." Perhaps it was someone who had never before invited Him in. Perhaps it was someone who had received Him at one level and now was being offered a deeper relationship. Perhaps it was me!

Is there room in your heart for Jesus this Christmas? What things or feelings need to be discarded so that your heart might have more room for Him? Perhaps you have heard the gospel proclaimed countless times but have never responded by inviting Jesus in. If so, you are in great danger. Every time you have heard the gospel but failed to respond, it is as if your heart has added another thin layer of scar tissue.

My father has had heart bypass surgery twice. The second procedure took much longer because of difficulty in cutting through the scar tissue from the first surgery. In a similar way, our layers of spiritual scar tissue bring greater and greater resistance to receiving Jesus, and require spiritual heart surgery. If this is your condition may the sword of the

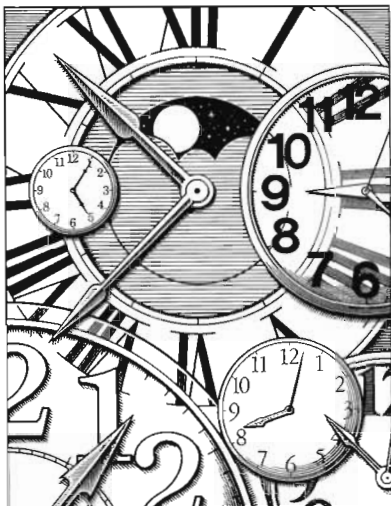
***And she gave birth to
her firstborn son and
wrapped Him in swad-
dling cloths, and laid
Him in a manger,
because there was
no room for them in
the inn.***

— Luke 2:7

Holy Spirit, the Word of God, cut through every layer of scar tissue. May you receive the greatest Gift ever given: the King of kings, yet born of Mary.

Let this Christmas be for receiving. Receive that which you must have and which only God can give: the bread of life and the cup of salvation. "He came to His own home and His own people received Him not. But to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:11-13). This Christmas may our voices say, "Come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee!" And may every heart become both a manger to receive Him and a throne for the King of kings!





Time for Jesus?

We are a family of nine with one more on the way. Our oldest is seventeen. All of us

are musical, playing violins, violas, cellos, flute, and guitar.

Often we have opportunity to share these gifts in ministry and

concerts, both singing as well as playing.

The oldest five children perform with a local youth orchestra, and I have been serving as board president for this organization. We school our children at home, and this includes many activities that require whole family involvement. It seems that vehicles and home are always needing attention and our shallow dug well adds challenges of its own, especially in the dry summer months. Add to these usual demands my regular employment as a physical therapist at our local nursing home and responsibilities as the music director at church, then throw in some unexpected medical emergencies, and you begin to get a sense of who the Overmans are.

It's not surprising that we have often found ourselves overextended! Lately, I have suffered from just such symptoms. What I am learning is: (1) there is no end to opportunities for involvement in and outside the home; (2) it is easy to lose sight of the Lord's purposes when we ignore His presence; (3) everything we think to be absolutely necessary is not; and (4) if you don't have a schedule, the world will give you one.

How do we survive? Sometimes it seems the answer is "just barely!" Given the nature of busy living, lessons for survival are picked up along the way. These begin with an awareness that our relationship with Jesus is not something we simply try to "make room for." Let me suggest some observations taken out of the Christmas story in the Gospel of Luke.

The innkeeper was not expecting Jesus that night long ago in Bethlehem. He was no doubt a busy man. Business was booming. Had he any idea at all who it was knocking on the door of his busy life? Being the good man that he was, he could not send this needy family away into the dark, cold night.

He attempted instead to "make room" for them. The result was an annexed shelter, far removed from the center of the inn, and consequently far removed from the innkeeper himself.

How different was the experience and response of those shepherds tending their flocks. Were they busy? Some have suggested that these shepherds spent the night with their flocks out of necessity to care for the ewes ready to bring forth lambs. Their response to the angelic proclamation was to completely change their plans. In essence, it was to alter their busyness. Whether or not they left their flocks or performed a mid-night migration with them, the fact is that these shepherds did not merely "make room" for Jesus. Theirs is a testimony of how Jesus can move the established foundations of everyday life when He is rightfully honored as the central theme of one's very existence and purpose.

Placing Jesus first in our lives and filling ourselves with Him is the primary step for effectively facing the multiple challenges of everyday life.

Without His presence within us, we have nothing to offer a world full of opportunities. However, with Him, we can be on the right track not only to keep our own lives in balance but also to be the kind of resource to others that God wishes us to be. The truth of Scripture in Matthew 6:33 has daily application: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

What about you? Do you find yourself struggling to make room for Jesus? May I encourage you to experience the balance of a life which is first filled with Him to the extent that all else must take its place beneath His presence. Here are four suggestions:

1. Seek for His blessing by placing Him first.
2. Be faithful to what He has given to you alone. Specifically, don't neglect your family responsibilities or personal health.
3. Give of the remainder of your energies generously to those opportunities which God will bring into your life to the extent that you do not violate the first two points.
4. Trust the rest (all that you cannot accomplish nor should attempt) into His hands. Remember, God would rather "do it Himself" than have you rob Him and those closest to you.

May this be a blessed season for you and your family with Jesus in His rightful place in each of your lives.



— Ken Overman
Minister of Music
Atonement Lutheran
Arlington, Washington

I Wonder As I Wander

I wonder as I wander out
under the sky,
How Jesus, the Savior,
did come for to die,
For poor, ornery people
like you and like I;
I wonder as I wander, out
under the sky.

When Mary birthed Jesus,
'twas in a cow's stall,
With wisemen and farmers
and shepherds and all,
But high from God's heaven
a star's light did fall,
And the promise of ages it
then did recall.

If Jesus had wanted for
any wee thing;
A star in the sky,
or a bird on the wing;
Or all of God's angels
in heaven to sing,
He surely could have had it,
'cause He was the King!



— Appalachian carol
collected by John Jacob Niles



Gold, Incense, & Myrrh

a model for our gift giving

— Joan Korhonen
Hosanna and Timberland-Ringebu Parish
Cumberland, Wisconsin

We have three little boys in our family and their favorite toys are Hot Wheel cars. One day as I was cleaning, I

was overwhelmed as I found trucks in the bedrooms, on the counter, on the couch, in the bathtub, and on the floor. I was enlightened as I took a little inventory and smiled as I recalled those gifts given with love in past birthdays and Christmases.

Now with Jesus' birthday almost here, I ask myself, "How can I make room for Jesus in my gift giving?" Verse two of the song, "Have You Any Room For Jesus?" reminds me: "Room for pleasure, room for business, but for Christ the Crucified, not a place that He can enter, in the heart for which He died." How can I, as a believer, be different from the noisy lure of commercialism and make room for Jesus as I give gifts this Christmas?

Consider the three gifts the Magi brought to Jesus in Matthew 2:11.

The first gift the Magi presented to Jesus was gold.

When I think of gold I am reminded of wealth and finery. The Magi gave of their finest. Thinking of this gift causes me to look at gift giving with these questions in mind: Why am I giving this gift? Will giving this gift bring glory to Jesus? How? Am I giving the best gift I can in monetary value or am I giving just because I have to?

I love giving gifts. I love to see people appreciate and enjoy what I have chosen for them. We all want to give gifts at Christmas to show our family and loved ones that we love them and they are special.

As our children get older, I want them to understand the concept of why we give gifts at Christmas. The day before Christmas, we as a family visit those in nursing homes who can't be home with family. We have found that Christmas Eve day is very quiet for visitors as everyone is so busy buying that last-minute gift and grocery item or home cooking and wrapping gifts. I want our children to understand Acts 20:35, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." I want them to start

thinking of what they can do and give to others. I want them to understand the sacrifice involved in giving just as God sacrificed His own Son as a gift for us. We can make room for Jesus in our giving by giving our best and of ourselves.

The second gift of the Magi was incense.

The definition of incense is, "an aromatic material or the perfume it produces when burned." This definition reminds me of candles or potpourri which leads me to think of creativity. In giving our gifts we can utilize our creative ideas which do not need to be expensive or elaborate. As a little girl I remember one year not having any money but wanting to give everyone in my family a gift. I can't recall everything I gave except the gift for my father. My father is an electrician. He always needed pencils, so I went around the house and found all the pencils I could and put a rubber band around them so he had a big bundle. I never expected his reaction of delight to my gift. He made me feel so special for thinking of him. To this day he remembers it and is grateful.

As a teacher, my favorite and most cherished gifts were those that were handmade. Some gifts included jars with a Christmas scene painted on the outside, paper angels, homemade fudge, cookies or ornaments. They were special because the student and family put time, effort and love into the gift. It could not be bought at the store, just like the greatest gift which God gave. We can make room for Jesus in our giving by using the creativity He has blessed us with.

The Magi also gave myrrh, an aromatic resin of certain plants used for incense.

I think of myrrh as being expensive and costly. Giving gifts can get expensive and setting limits is important before we even buy the gifts. Going into debt is not a way to make room for Jesus! Budget for this special time. I know of families who set aside money each month for Christmas so that when the gifts are picked out they are already paid for.

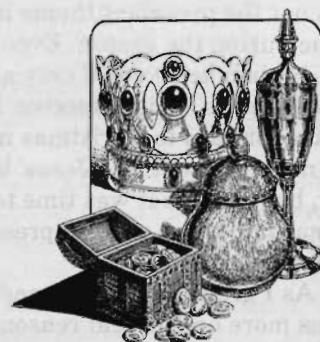
Another idea could be to give each person three gifts as the Magi gave: The first gift could be something they have asked for or really would like. The second gift could be a spiritual/Christian gift such as a Bible, book, video or CD. The third one could be a learning gift such as a puzzle, game, tool or craft. Another option is to give one gift for each person in your family and then a fami-

ly gift. Or perhaps choose to buy one gift and the other would be homemade. Pray for each person as you are buying the gift. Pray also that you would be led to buy the right gift. Be careful and selective in your gift giving. We can make room for Jesus in our giving by giving wisely!

Christmas can be very special and extraordinary in our gift giving while room is made for Jesus in our hearts. On Christmas Eve or Christmas Day before we open our gifts our family enjoys a special time of singing Christmas carols, sharing of any Bible verses, or songs that were learned for a Christmas program, reading of the Christmas story, and anything else that brings worship, honor and praise to God for giving us Jesus, His very best Gift. When Jesus is put first, Christmas will last far beyond the brief moments of opening the gifts.



**As they offered
gifts most rare
At Thy cradle,
rude and bare,
So may we with holy joy,
Pure and free from
sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures
bring,
Christ, to Thee, our
heavenly King.**



**— William C. Dix
Ambassador Hymnal No. 53**

What's the message we send?

My mother always taught me the real meaning of Christmas. I cannot remember a single year during my childhood when that was not the prevalent theme in our home during the season. Even so, my childish heart could only anticipate the gifts I might receive. I looked forward to Christmas morning not because it was Jesus' birthday, but because it was time to finally tear into those colorful presents under the tree!

As I grew older, I learned to focus more on the real reason for Christmas, rather than on myself. I now have three children of my own, and I see myself in them. God has taught me so much through my children, and the lessons are not over yet.

One of the truths I have tried to teach my children is from Philippians 2:3-4, which says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." I have tried to steer them away from the "what am I getting?" mentality, but, of course, that's not always possible with a four-year-old!

Messages are sent in everything I say and do. So what kind of message am I sending to others during this Christmas season? Angels brought an important message to a group of lowly shepherds one night



over two thousand years ago. That message was "Peace on Earth!"

Christmas is often the busiest time of the year, with all the shopping, decorating, baking, and preparations that must be made. It's everything except peace! My focus drifts away from the Christ, and toward myself instead. I need to consider the real reasons for my long list of things to do. Am I doing these things to bless, or impress? The Bible reminds me not to be anxious about anything, and His peace will reign in my heart (Philippians 4:6-7).

As an artist, I also must ask the same question, "Am I doing this to bless, or to impress?" This was the question that came to mind when I volunteered to do a line of greeting card illustrations for our church youth group's Christmas card sale a few years ago. Originally, I had in mind a group of drawings I had done recently for a greeting card company in Chicago, drawings which had not been sold. They were only in the rough sketch stage, and I could have produced the finished illustrations in a lot less time than it would have taken to come up with completely new designs.

But then, as I looked at these rough sketches, I realized that there was nothing at all in these drawings to point people to the Lord!

There wasn't anything bad in them, but they just didn't say anything about Jesus being born or about God's love for us.

In the final analysis, they would not have "blessed" anyone; instead, they might have simply "impressed."

— *Teresa Fehrenbach*
St. Olaf Lutheran
Montgomery, Illinois

After praying about this, I knew God was the one who had given me this revelation, so I resolved to start an entirely new set of designs which would clearly speak about God's love. They took much longer to complete than had originally been planned, and we barely made the deadline for printing, but the finished products were worth the time spent. I made sure that each illustration was accompanied by a Bible verse that spoke about Jesus. This way, when people bought these cards, they could send them out to loved ones and friends as a message that God loves them and paid a heavy price to bring them to Himself.

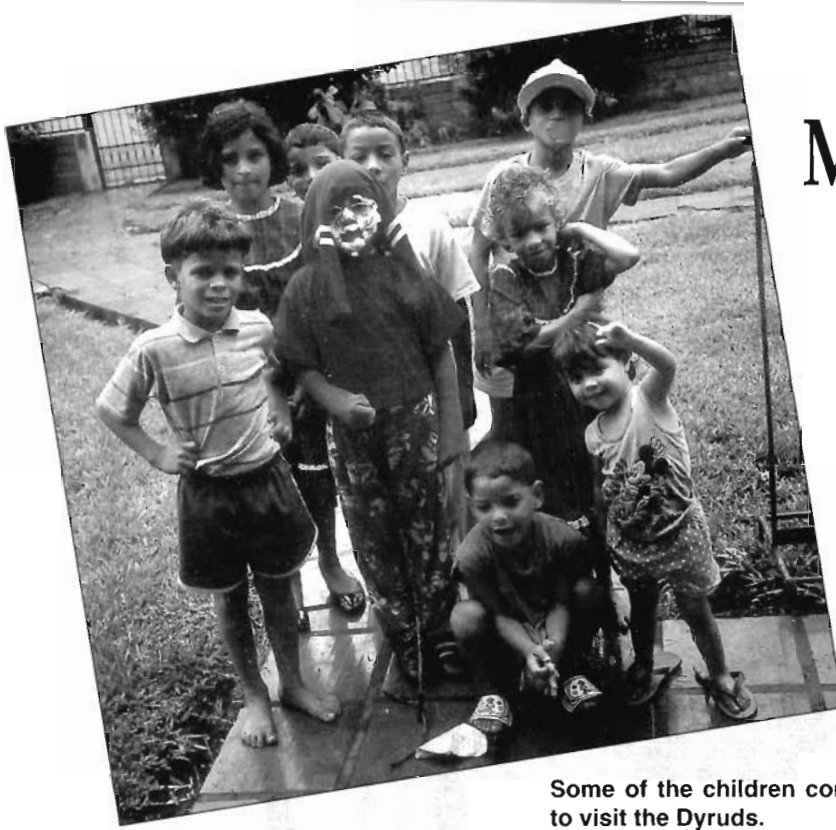
I see so few cards like this in most of the stores. Many of them have Santa, reindeer, Christmas trees, presents, maybe even toys and things children look forward to getting. Is this the kind of message we should be sending?

I tend to see greeting cards as an extension of the sender's heart. Proverbs 27:19 says, "As water reflects a face, so a man's heart reflects the man." For this reason, I want to share with others the One who is in my heart. I want Jesus to be reflected in the message I send.



One of my favorite passages in the Bible is in Isaiah 40:11, "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock; in His arms He will gather the lambs, and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes." I have not had the opportunity to do illustrations of any kind since those cards were done. Right now, God has called me to the task of caring for three of His lambs, and He is gently leading me.





Some of the children coming to visit the Dyruds.

Miquel's Christmas

I asked him, "If your Mãe left you, who took care of you?"

"We four brothers took care of ourselves. The oldest is 16 and I'm eight, the youngest," he continued. "Worse yet, my mãe came back with our 'uncle' and kicked the four of us out of our 'rancho.' Now we live under a bridge."

By this time he had polished both shoes and had begun doing the "spit shine." I mean that literally. He spit into his muddy hands, rubbed them together and then rubbed them on my shoe. Then he took a sticky, stained rag out of his shoeshine box and started to shine. After going through the procedure for a time, he stopped instantly, looked up with a big smile and said, "gostou tio?" (do you like it uncle).

I looked down nodding and said, "Excellent." He tapped my other leg so that he could do the same thing on the other shoe. I said, "Wait a minute, filho, what's your name?" as I put my other foot on his shoebox. He smiled and croaked out with a wink, "Everybody calls me, 'Miquel,' though I'm not an angel."

"You know Miquel," I said, "Jesus really loves you and does not want you to live the way you do. He has a better life for you if you give your heart to Him." He looked up and said with tears in his eyes, "Pastor, pastor who?" I replied, "Pastor Joel."

Then he went on. "Pastor Joel, I don't believe a thing anybody tells me anymore. Everybody lies to me and steals from me. I don't care about anyone or anything. I just live for today. The Jesus you talk about, I can't see and He doesn't care about me or my life. It would be different if He did."

"Miquel," I said, "give Jesus a chance in your life." "No, I won't," he grunted, then he started the same process of spit on my other shoe. On completion he looked up with a big smile and said, "Look tio, I can see my teeth shining in your shoes, now you owe me a big, big gorjeta."

"Very well, Miquel, would you

The tropical rains were light that Christmas eve. It was humid & sticky. Around 10:30 p.m., I heard someone clapping outside by the gate. As I stepped out, I saw the red and blue lights of a police car glaring in my eyes. A police officer asked me, "Are you Pastor Joel?" With a quick reply I said, "yes sir." Pointing to his squad car, he asked, "do you know this 'marginal' (one without a home) in there?"

The door was open and the dome lights shone on the dirty, tear-streaked face of a skinny, shoeless, shirtless child. The child looked at me with a big smile on his face shaking his head, "yes," and pointing to himself. The other police officer sitting by his side holding his arm, looked at me shaking his head, "no!"

For a moment I could not remember ever seeing him. Then my mind wandered back as I remembered that big smile on his little face. ...

It was about six months earlier in the center of town, when a little scrawny shoeshine boy tapped me on the arm asking, "tio, da me troco" (uncle, give me some loose change). I told him: "You shine my shoes and I'll give you a 'gorjeta' (a big tip)." A

big smile broke out on his face as he said, "It's a deal tio."

I was standing by an open air coffee stand, sipping black, thick, sweet coffee. He put his homemade shoeshine box on the sidewalk by me and tapped my leg as I put one foot on the fragile, shaky box. He was real friendly and talkative. He asked, "Tio, what do you do for a living?" Smiling up at me, his face was dirty, his hair was matted and muddy. I responded, "Filho, (son) I'm a teacher, pastor and have a home for abandoned children, up to eight years old," and "what about you?"

"Tio," he groaned, "you would never want to hear my life story." I smiled down at him and said, "Filho, try me." Without raising his head he began spilling out one of the most miserable life stories that any adolescent could have ever lived.

"I don't ever remember having a father. We, my three brothers and I, lived in the slums, with my mãe (mom) who had a different man almost every night. These men were mean to us, many were drunk and kicked us out of our "rancho" (shack) at night, so we had to sleep outside many nights of the year. Then this last year, Mãe ran off with our 'uncle', so we finally had a little peace in our 'rancho.'"

— **Pastor Connely J. Dyrud**
AFLC Missionary
Campo Mourão, Brazil

like a meat pastel? (Brazilian paste). "Hum," he smiled, "that sounds great. I haven't had anything to eat today." So he ate three pastels with café com leite, (coffee and milk). I gave him his tip, and his face beamed as he squealed, "obrigado" (thanks) many times while walking, then running away. I finished my second xícara (small cup) of coffee and paid the owner of the small coffee stand. He looked at me and shook his head as he had listened to the conversation with the shoeshine boy.

"That's why our country is the way it is today," he snorted. "That kid should be in school, not running around in such disgrace."

Just then I heard a scream down the street. It was Miquel being jumped and robbed by two older teenagers. I spun around to help but I felt a strong hand grab my arm and hold me back. It was the coffee stand owner, as he shouted out to me, "You're crazy. Those teenagers are armed. Run for the police."

I looked for the police, but all had gone for lunch. Then I looked around for Miquel, but all was quiet; no one to be found, all three had vanished. ...

I thought I'd never see Miquel again ...

I was thrust back into the present of Christmas Eve as the police

officer tapped me on the shoulder two or three times saying, "Pastor Joel, do you know that 'moleque da rua' (street kid) or not?"

Miquel's eyes were pleading with me. The officer said, "Pastor, we didn't think you knew him. We'll take him back and throw him into jail with the other criminals. We caught him robbing a bicycle tonight."

"No, no officer," I blurted out. "I know Miquel, he will stay in our Miriam Infant Home." The officer looked at me and asked, "Pastor, you mean to tell me that you really do know this kid? Miquel told us that he knew Pastor Joel and that you would take care of him, we told him that he was just lying and that we would prove it. But I guess he was right after all."

As I reached out my hand to him he burst into tears. As he grabbed my hand, the other officer let go of him. As he stepped out of the squad car, Miquel threw his arms around me and wouldn't let go as we started down toward the children's home. The officer shouted, "Pastor, wait a minute, you are going to have to sign these documents taking on the full responsibilities for Miquel over the holidays. After the first of the year we'll start the procedures with the juvenile judge."

Christmas morning was hot and muggy. The rains had stopped but the humidity was high. The children from the home generally come over to our place for a Christmas noon meal. As the more than twenty children lined up to sit around the tables out in our open air garage, I

asked where Miquel was. "Here I am," he grinned. I didn't recognize him. He was all cleaned up, his hair was combed and he had on nice, clean clothes and shoes, from our "Sala Dorca" (Dorcas room).

After the hearty meal of chicken, rice, wiggly Jell-O salad and more, the Christmas story was read. All the children heard about another "poor boy" who left His home and father in heaven and walked among us and then was killed for our sins. This Jesus really does understand our sufferings and He really does want to live in our hearts and lives.

As Christmas songs were sung, Miquel sat quietly by himself crying. I sat down beside him and asked him if there was anything I could do. He cried out, "I really never believed that anybody cared about me. I thought you were like everybody else. I really do want Jesus in my heart." So that Christmas Day, Miquel's life was changed.

He stayed in the Miriam Infant Home and cleared his name. As time went on he moved on to live with his grandmother in another city.

We thank Jesus for each child in the children's home. We thank you for your prayers and support for this labor of love in Brazil.

Keep praying for the twenty-some children in the home and the eightysome adolescents and teenagers on the work farm turned over to our AFLC Bible School and Seminary to direct and administer.



AFLC President Robert Lee (far left) at the dedication service of the Miriam Infant Home in Campo Mourao, Brazil, on January 17, 1993.



Missionaries Connely and Carolyn Dyrud.

Focusing on Jesus in our family celebrations

— Nanette Kent
Rancho San Diego
Lutheran
El Cajon, California

As the Christmas season comes upon us, it is very easy to get caught up in all of the shopping, parties and other festivities. As soon as November hits our society is bombarded with television ads telling us what is hot for Christmas gifts this year. We begin feeling stress over Christmas cards and what holiday goodies we will be giving away.

Amidst all of this hustle and bustle, it is so easy to forget what Christmas is really all about. It is the day that we as Christians celebrate the birth of our precious Savior. Of all people, we should find ourselves set apart, a community working together to shine the light of the truth of the gospel in a dark and lost world. Where best to begin to shine this truth but in our homes.

Our children should know and understand the real meaning of Christmas, even from a very young age. Most children raised in a Christian home probably know that Christmas is Jesus' birthday. However, is this all they really need to know? Do they truly know why Jesus came and of God's wonderful plan of redemption and salvation?

As parents, and grandparents, we need to take seriously the awesome task delegated to us by God to "... bring up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). In recent years our family has instituted family devotions as a means of teaching our two daughters the truth and love of our Savior. What better time to begin this than during the Advent

season. There are a variety of family-oriented Advent books available at Christian bookstores. These books will take you and your family through nightly devotionals which focus on the coming of Christ and what this means to us.

Another great idea that we did a few years ago was to make our own pine wreath which hung horizontally from a door jam. We then found 25 Bible passages which pertained to or prophesied the coming of Christ.

We wrote the verses on 4 x 4 inch pieces of brightly colored squares of paper, and folded the corners into the center. We then hung these with ribbon from the wreath. Each night one of our children picked one of the verses, and we read the passage and discussed it. We would conclude with a Christ-centered Christmas carol or hymn. This was so enjoy-

able and memorable for our daughters that they ask for the same every year.

For Christmas this year let us humbly come to Jesus, and by His grace let us, as we are instructed by the writer of Hebrews, "... lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2). May Jesus be the focus of our families' Christmas celebrations.





Trusting Jesus in the midst of loneliness

— *Larry Thompson*
Faith Lutheran
Brockton, Montana

The third chapter of Exodus tells the story of how God spoke to Moses from the burning bush asking him to go to Pharaoh and bring His people out of Egypt. Moses replies by asking, "who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" This response is so typical of us when we are placed in unwanted situations! The question God is ultimately asking is: "Do you trust Me?"

In January 1998, my wife, Ardene, died from cancer. We found out she had this dreaded disease about a year after our daughter, Jackie, came into our lives. It was a complete surprise when the doctor announced she probably had only two to three years to live. Ardene courageously fought the disease for three and a half years until she moved from this earth to her true home.

"Do you trust Me?" That question remains as I deal with the issues of being alone and raising a young daughter. Everything was going so well. The Lord added Jackie to our family and we felt blessed.

Then Ardene is no longer here. Loneliness entered my life. And now with Christmas approaching, the pain intensifies. We made special memories together and now part of the family is missing. The times my daughter and I are with other families who are whole, and enjoying each other, the feeling intensifies.

Sometimes in my struggle with loneliness, I ask, "Lord, are you really with me? Do You really know what You are doing? Is this Your plan? Lord, do You really love me?" I believe these questions are ultimately concerned with the issue of trust. God answered Moses' doubt by saying, "I will be with you." In Exodus 4:11-12, God reminds Moses: "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."

God's love for me is complete and flows to any experience I have, in spite of my doubts.

My God is the God of the mountain tops as well as of the valleys. Ephesians 3:17-19 refers to that perfect love: "And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, ... to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

I wish I could say that loneliness is an issue I no longer face, but I can't. However, the Lord gives me strength to continue on with joy. Nehemiah 8:10 says, "Do not grieve, the joy of the Lord is your strength." That joy is simply this: God loves me and sent His Son, born in a manger, to provide the way of salvation.

This Christmas, if loneliness threatens to ruin the joy of celebrating the birth of God's Son, know that Christ desires to enter our hearts to fill us "to the measure of all the fullness of God." Trust Him. It is joy to lean on Him. There is no one else.





Why have a Christmas program

- ☆ To celebrate together as a body of believers God's gift to the world of Jesus the Savior;
- ☆ To implant essential Bible truths deep into the minds and hearts of participants;
- ☆ To remind believers of the true meaning of Christmas;
- ☆ To invite others to church, giving them an opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus and to respond to the wondrous gift of salvation.



What to look for in planning

- ☆ The central message that Jesus came to be the Savior of the world;
- ☆ A proclamation that forgiveness of sins is found only in knowing Jesus as Savior;
- ☆ Music that focuses on the message of Jesus and is reverent in character;
- ☆ Speaking parts appropriate for the ages participating and with a strong emphasis on Scripture.



What to avoid

- ☆ Anything that distracts from the central message that Jesus is the Savior;
- ☆ Texts that imply salvation can be earned by our own efforts;
- ☆ Productions that place more emphasis on our giving to others than on God's gift to us;
- ☆ Cute plays that are intended to merely give warm feelings about the spirit of the season or to motivate us to be kind and good, but are devoid of Christ;
- ☆ Scripts that distort the truth by using part of the Christmas story, but embellish it with other flowery details that are not scriptural.



— *Marian J. Christopherson*
AFLC Parish Education Director

Room for Jesus in our traditions

— *Hope Unverzagt*
Grace Lutheran
DeKalb, Illinois

On top of our piano sits a manger set that is fifty years old. It is chipped in many places. The music box doesn't work.

The angel that is supposed to be suspended above the scene doesn't really hang right. One of the shepherd's legs has been reattached with glue. It is not an elegant decoration by any means. It is rough and simple, but it is one of my family's favorite decorations.

The set originally belonged to Grandpa and Grandma Dyrud. I was in attendance when it was set up in 1965, my first Christmas, and then helped to set it up every Christmas after that until I was able to do it myself. "When are you coming to put up the manger set?" my grandma would ask. Somehow I always managed to make it back to Newfolden, Minnesota even after I moved to Minneapolis, six hours away.

When I was married Grandma gave the manger set to me and I continue to put it up each year at my own house. That manger scene sent a strong message to me about the meaning of Christmas, and it sends the same message to my children today.

Over the years I've heard some interesting Christmas traditions. One family I know orders out for pizza on Christmas Eve. Another volunteers at a local mission. And yet another lets each child open one gift on the night of the 23rd.

Traditions can be great! They give us something to look forward to, strengthen the connections between people who share them, and create delightful memories. However, when Jesus is included in the traditions they become richer, taking on eternal significance. And considering the fact that the whole point of Christmas is for us to celebrate God sending His Son to earth as a baby, it is vitally important we make room for



Jesus in our traditions.

North of Thief River Falls, Minnesota, is a little country church that has long since closed its doors to weekly services. The doors are reopened once a year on the Saturday after Christmas for a special candlelight Christmas service. About 4:30 in the afternoon, people start filing into Satersdal Lutheran Church, leaving the frosty outdoors for the cozy warmth of an oil stove and an abundance of candlelight. Yellow flames burn from candles perched on every surface, including an old wagon wheel fashioned into a chandelier which hangs from the ceiling. Midway through the service, during the singing of "Jeg Er Sa Glad," the candles on the tree are lit for the remainder of the service. There are sometimes up to ninety candles burning in all!

We squish together in the pews of the crowded little church, the top halves of our bodies toasty from the heat of the stove but growing gradually colder all the way down to our toes where the warm air doesn't seem to reach. We sing many Christmas hymns to the accompaniment of the old pump organ before hearing the Word of God preached. As we sit there we are reminded of godly men and women of centuries past who celebrated the birth of Christ in much the same fashion. What an encouragement to our faith

and a reminder of the steadfastness of the Lord. I am always blessed when I am able to return home for the Satersdal service.

There are many ways to make room for Jesus in our Christmas traditions. Our children look forward to hearing their father read the Christmas story out of a pop-up book that opens out into a star, which we set in a prominent place. We also have a large metal nail, which we hang in an inconspicuous spot on our tree to remind us in a meaningful way of the reason for Christ's birth — to die for our sins.

Programs can be special, too. My siblings and I used to plan a program for our parents each Christmas Eve, complete with instrumental numbers, a re-enactment of the Christmas story, and handprinted bulletins. Our ornaments, our stories, and our music can all serve to make Jesus our central focus.

When my children once again take out the old manger set and place it on our piano, they will carefully arrange the burly shepherds, heavily laden camels, and the beautiful angels, and set them in their positions. It's always the smallest figure, however, that intrigues them the most — the baby Jesus!

May that precious baby Jesus fascinate each one of us through our traditions this Christmas season.



It happened in the fall of 1909. We sailed out from a harbor in Haiti, where we had loaded logwood (trees used for dyeing) for Le Havre. The vessel was a little iron ship of approximately 800 regular tons, an excellent sailer in tiptop condition both as to rigging and hull.

With its slim lines and striking carriage it resembled more a pleasure yacht than a merchant ship. Many times we had competed in sailing matches both with sailing vessels and steamboats and stood up very well. One time we won an exciting race with the ferry which ran between Montevideo and Buenos Aires. Then it can be imagined that "Hurrah!" was shouted with loud voice when we saluted with our handsome flag and, "in all modesty" issued an invitation, as if to say, "Would you like a tow?"

As seamen, most of us were very proud of our ship and sprang willingly to our work, whether it was with the sails in storms and in the dark, or if it was something as ordinary as scraping the hull and scouring the decks. We were a company of young, happy sailors, with the captain as the oldest man, of the high age of 36 years. He bore the title of "many years" of experience. A seaman was he. Respected and popular he was to all on board.

The route from Haiti and around Cape San Antonio, the west point of Cuba, and further out on the Florida straits, brought few difficulties. The weather was moderate and the seas smooth, with cooling northeast trade winds..

During the day there was bright sunshine over the blue ocean, with dolphins and flying fish in lively play in front of the bow. And nights with dark blue skies, sparkling with stars, and cooling breezes, carried with them all the spice-filled scents which stream out from a subtropical nature's luxuriant vegetation.

Yes, so it could be sometimes in the life of the sailor.

But the Gulf Stream carried us quickly northward — to stormy weather and a harsher climate.

We went to our winter sails and cleared out ship to meet the North



Have they forgotten us?

A Christmas memory

Atlantic, which especially in the wintertime can present many surprises. This voyage was about to give us that experience in rich measure.

What we dreamed about was a good northwest breeze which would bring us over "the pond" so quickly that we could reach Le Havre in good time for Christmas. Specifically, we had in mind the Christmas activities in the church, something which stood for us young men as the high point of the year. Some of us had been there (Le Havre) before and therefore knew both the pastor and his assistant, and their families — faithful friends who had our full respect and affection.

One evening it became so uncomfortably calm. The sails hung limp and slapped against the masts and rigging. The barometer fell to "the bottom." None of us had ever, the captain included, seen a barometer reading that low. The air was so full of electricity that fire balls danced on all the yardarms and mastheads. The man at the wheel stood for a time illuminated in blue fire because the balls of fire danced around on the spokes of the steering wheel and cast a pale gold light over the man's face, so that it had a ghostlike tinge.

We furled all the sails tightly — staysail and the lower topsail — and waited with suspense for what would come. And I should say it came! As though released from a bag, the hurricane was upon us. The

sails unfurled and tore out for the ropes as though they were made of paper. The ship was driven by the wind and heeled over so that the yardarms for the lower crossbeam dipped in the water. In an instant the sea was in a mighty uproar. The waves rushed against us from the gloom and the sea stood suspended in storm. We had to say in all truth with the psalmist, "They reeled and staggered like drunken men, and were to their wits' end" (RSV). Such was our situation.

Time seemed an eternity. Each second could be our last. If the ship capsized, there was no hope for us.

The most favorable thing that could happen was that the rigging went overboard and became a derelict wreck.

There are serious times out on the ocean. Through the storm's roar and the ocean's overwhelming fury, He speaks Who has power over the forces of nature and to Whom we can confidently call for help.

After four hours the storm abated so much that we got the boat on course with a single small turn, setting the large lower topsail. But then there was wild sailing both day and night. The sea became powerful in its arrogance. We dropped down into the abyss, we rose up high as

— *Ingvald Henriksen*
from "*Sjømannsmisjonens*
Julehefte"
(Translated by
Pastor Raynard Huglen)

the heavens. Sometimes the crests of the waves licked the helmsmen's sea boots where they stood, two men roped to the steering wheel. And then we were hurled with great speed down to the trough, so that the jib sail beam dipped in the sea.

Christmas was approaching and our hope of reaching our goal for Christmas Eve vanished. If we survived at all.

While we pondered upon that, a wave came sneaking over the side, swept forward and struck the deck-house (forecastle), rushed through the door and into the bunks below. The ship's lockers and our clothing tumbled together. And then a new

mountainous wave came and hurled itself with terrific force against the galley, taking with it both doors and most of what wasn't secured. So it was that we retreated to the cabin again. There we conferred, all of us, and attempted as well as we could to volunteer each other's courage to hold out. But soon there came a new heavy sea which broke against the skylight, smacked it and in so doing destroyed our last dry living space.

But we were young and could endure for a while yet. The captain cheered us with his light-hearted humor and good seamanship. We worked hard and tugged the ropes and bailed the water. The ship was tight and held up admirably. The rigging was intact and we had sails in reserve.

Finally, after 14 days of sailing as a phantom ship the wind moderated. We spotted Lizard (Lizard Head is the southernmost tip of

England — Tr.) on the left side of the ship, toward the bow, and set our course for Cape de la Hague and Havre Way, to which we arrived far out in the new year.

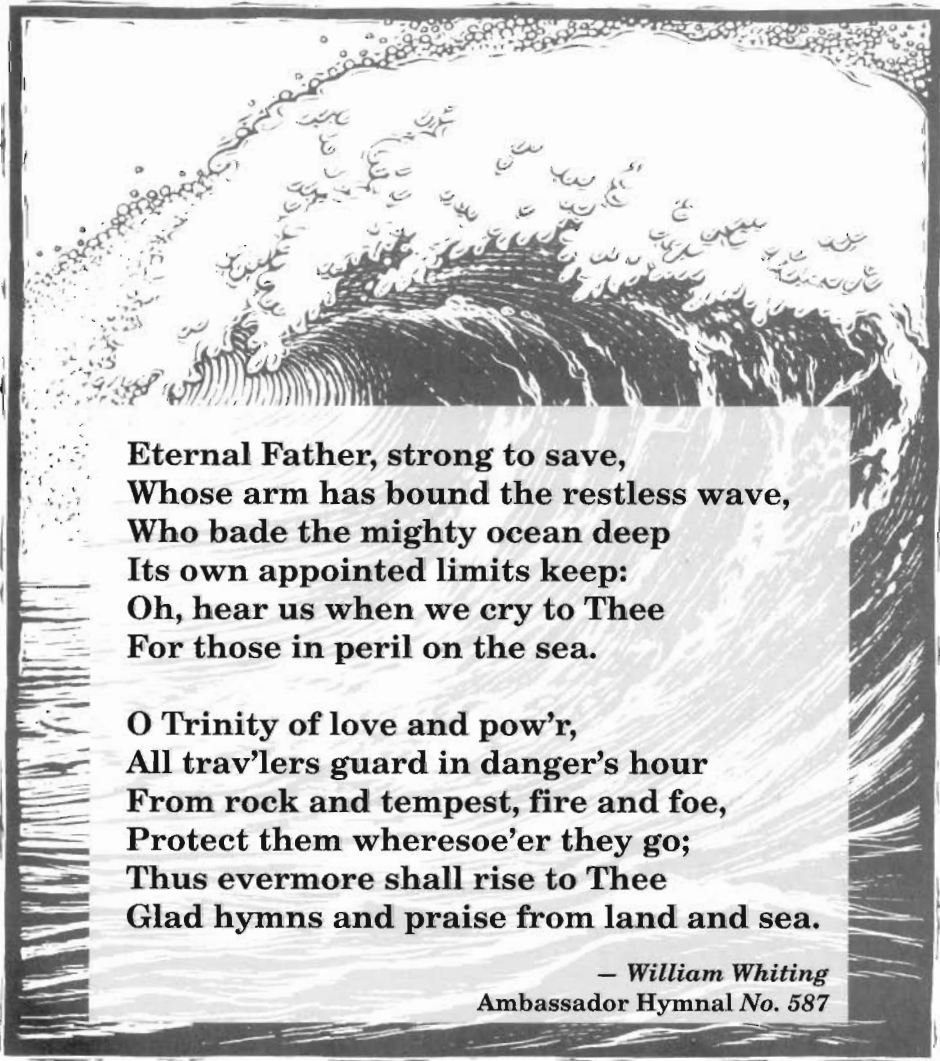
But now there would surely not be any Christmas celebration? Oh yes! There stood the pastor on the dock and as soon as we had the ladder over the railing he was on board and said, "You can see we have been waiting for you! Welcome to the Christmas tree fest tonight, boys!"

And so we sat there anyway. Storm-driven young sailors, saved out of death's chasm, and there we let the relative safety of land and the church's blessed quiet and peace seep in and speak to our tired and longing hearts. The message of Christmas in music and word sounded wonderful. In shining luster the spruce tree stood — a little the worse for wear perhaps this far out in Christmas — but still with its lights and other decorations. And at the foot of the tree there were lying Norwegian Christmas presents, packages from the homeland elegantly and beautifully wrapped with fine paper and gold ribbon. There were gifts from kind people in our dear fatherland who in this way greeted us with loving thoughts and Christmas letters.

It was a festival time which one can never forget.

In the hard times which war brings, it was this same church in Le Havre which was destroyed. But it is to be hoped that it will not be long before a new and practical seaman's church will be raised from out of the ravages of the bombing, so that sailors who come to Le Havre can gather at the invitation of the church bells, which offers a welcome to come in through the open doors.

The day of the sailing ship is past. That is so. And soon the steamship will also be a memory. But in their wake great merchant ships and giant tanker ships sail. On the seven seas still float the cross-marked flags of Norwegian ships, with their young men on board, which still are able to cast a luster over the country and flag.



**Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm has bound the restless wave,
Who bade the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep:
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee
For those in peril on the sea.**

**O Trinity of love and pow'r,
All trav'lers guard in danger's hour
From rock and tempest, fire and foe,
Protect them wheresoe'er they go;
Thus evermore shall rise to Thee
Glad hymns and praise from land and sea.**

— *William Whiting*
Ambassador Hymnal No. 587

For all those who live in the
shadow of death

A glorious light has dawned

For all those who stumble
in the darkness

Behold your light
has come!

Immanuel
Our God is with us
And if God is with us
Who could stand against us
Our God is with us
Immanuel

— taken from “Immanuel” by Michael Card



Our New Year tree and our friend's new life

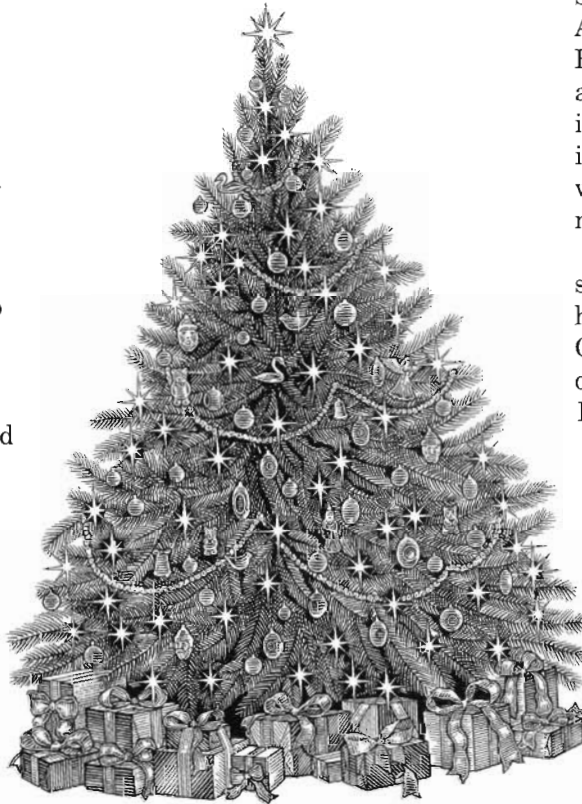
— Mavis Richman
Emmaus Lutheran
Bloomington, Minnesota

A delightful 46-year-old Russian lady named Tanya came to live with us in the fall of 1993. Her goal was to improve her English language skills. We suggested she could do this more quickly in a classroom environment. She readily accepted our recommendation and began studying at the Lay Ministry Training Center (LMTc) in Roseville, Minnesota.

December came and we learned that Tanya knew very little about experiencing Christmas. Once during Soviet times, she heard the "Messiah" performed in a church in Latvia. Also, after the fall of Communism, she saw a Russian Orthodox Christmas service on television.

Before the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russians were religious. But, when the state became antagonistic toward Christianity, the people evidently transferred Christmas traditions to the New Year's celebration. That year, Tanya referred to our decorated tree as the "New Year tree."

Tanya had never experienced Christmas in her heart. She had no Emmanuel; she had no God with her. She was divorced from her husband. She had to stand on her own two feet, fend for herself, support her young son and care for her ailing mother. Everything rested



on her shoulders. These difficult circumstances created tension and anxiety within her. Her beautiful face showed the strain of hardship and sorrow.

Have you ever wondered what it would be like if there were no Christmas: no gifts, no lights, no carols and no family gatherings? More importantly, have you ever meditated on what life would be like if our Creator, offended by our rebellion against His love, had decided to turn His back and abandon us to our own devices? What if Jesus had not come to rescue us? What if He had not been born?

But, He has come! He has died

in our place and for our sins! He came to rescue Tanya during that year. Jesus made Himself known to her through the love of her fellow students, the faithful teaching of her professors and through her own study of the Bible. She came to America an atheist and returned to Russia a believer because she accepted Jesus as her personal Savior. She came alone but went home in the care of her heavenly Father whom she was learning to trust. A new softness graced her lovely face.

When Tanya returned to Russia after her first year at LMTc, her son was baptized at the local Orthodox church. Through a series of miracles, Tanya returned to LMTc for a second year of study.

As her understanding of God's Word grew, her faith deepened and her life changed. She was baptized that fall in a very special ceremony during the Sunday worship at North Heights Lutheran Church.

Tanya returned to Petrozavodsk, Russia, in August 1995 as a missionary to her own family, workplace and city. She resumed her former position as an English teacher at Lyceum (school) #1 and has played a key role in the formation of a Christian center within this public school. She has contributed enormously to the success of four English language Bible camps held at Lyceum #1 since 1996. She is a leader of women's Bible studies and has had a ministry to delinquent boys.

Emmanuel! God is with Tanya! Christmas has become her favorite season. In fact, she now celebrates it twice a year — on December 25 with her Lutheran and American friends, and again on January 6, which is the Russian Orthodox Christmas Day.



Get in the spirit by letting the Spirit in

People do many things this time of year to try and get in the Christmas spirit. They put up decorations thinking that certain wreath will change their mood or that special ornament will transform their attitude. They listen to Christmas carols or go to an annual concert thinking that will get them in the spirit of the season. For others it might be a certain kind of food that is made and enjoyed this time of year and relied upon to make Christmas special.

All those things can be good and enjoyable, and effective at impacting our mood for a time. They may seem to get us in the spirit of the season ... or do they?

The true Christmas spirit is not something a decoration can create or a baked good can generate. A song cannot produce it. The Spirit of Christmas is not something that we get into as much as He gets into us.

Many people work hard at trying to make Christmas meaningful for themselves and others. They seem to think that by good planning and their own efforts, they can make it happen.

Many take the same approach to getting right with God. They think they can make it happen by doing the appropriate things. They try to create the right kind of spirit within themselves. If they plan well, work hard, get good advice and follow it, they can do it; or so they think. Like the many running around trying to get it all done before December 25, they spend their whole life trying to get it all done before they die. They hope they'll do enough of the right things so that God will be pleased. Like a host busily preparing to entertain guests, they are busy preparing to entertain God when He comes.

Christmas is about God coming to us. It is not about Him coming, expecting us to entertain Him and demonstrate the great things we have accomplished. He does not come to see how well we have organized things and gotten our life all together. Some guests at a Christmas gathering may look around to see how well the host has cleaned. God does not come to check out our life in the same way. He already knows how dirty it is; but still He comes.

"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). He does not come to check out

how we are doing. He comes because of how we are doing. We can't get our lives cleaned. The place is a mess. We are not ready at all to entertain the King of kings; and that is why He comes. He comes to serve us. He comes to pay the penalty for our sins. He comes to do what we cannot do and that is to make us fit to be in the presence of the holy God. He came that we might have life. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10, NIV). It is not about Him coming to see if we have gotten in the spirit of things. It is about His Spirit coming to get into us.

Are you busy trying to get into the Christmas spirit, or are you asking God's Spirit to get into you?

We can get so busy, trying to do so many good things that we miss out on that which is best.

We read in the Gospel of Luke of Jesus visiting the home of two sisters. It says regarding the one, "Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made." The other, Mary, "sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said" (Luke 10:39, 40, NIV). Martha was concerned about her sister not doing her share of the work. The Lord addressed her concern by saying: "Martha, Martha, ... you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41, 42, NIV).

Christmas can be a time when many "Marthas" appear. We try to do what we think is necessary. We get distracted by all the preparations that we believe must be made, and at times we fail to do the one thing that is needed.

Be sure to spend time this Christmas season with the One who came for you. Spend some extra time in worship, in His Word, in prayer, rejoicing in His coming. If doing that results in some decorations not getting up, some packages not being wrapped as well as they could, some baking not getting done, missing a program — so be it. Don't miss out on the best: getting to know the One who came to make God known.

We at *The Lutheran Ambassador* would like to wish all of you a wonderful Christmas with Jesus!

— **Pastor Craig Johnson**

"The Spirit of Christmas is not something that we get into as much as He gets into us."

SOMETHING TO SHARE

A word of hope

Today in my state of South Dakota a small jet buoyed helplessly through the skies until it came to an abrupt end in a slough. Military pilots were assigned to escort the Learjet, but attempts to rescue the six people on board were hopeless.

There are a select few persons in an imaginary Learjet whom I am escorting towards eternity. I love these few unconditionally. They may be family, they may be close friends — people in my circle of influence who especially burn in my heart. I am befriending them and praying for them. I am seeking to live a consistent, clear visual witness before them. I am opening my mouth with the message of Jesus at any opportunity. I think in the earnestness of my mind, “If only I say just the right words, they will understand and surrender.” Still there seems to be no response from the Learjet. I am tempted to give up in hopelessness.

Don’t you need a word of hope at the end of this millennium? Don’t you need a word of hope as you carry out an assignment to share life with those you are escorting to an inevitable end? A departed sage in our congregation would remind us that the key to such hope is to “PERSEVERE!” He would exclaim with conviction, “We’ve read the last chapter, and we win!” Christmas brings such a word of hope.

One moment in time Jesus gave up equality with God. He emptied Himself. He humbly became mankind’s servant, obeying His assignment even to the point of death. Then God exalted Him highly. Lord Jesus is the highest name that all creation will ultimately, reverently confess (Philippians 2).

Christmas says I will have hope as I empty myself. So much of my schedule, my priorities and my money circles around me. I find myself grasping on to earthly life, but the truth remains, I am not here on earth for me.

Christmas says I will have hope as I become a servant. My assignment includes bowing down to the Lordship of Christ and humbly obeying Him until my point of death. If this mission wasn’t too lowly, or on the other extreme, too demanding for Jesus Christ, it is a rightful position for me. I am commissioned to befriend, pray for, influence, challenge and serve all of those God sends alongside me.

Christmas says I will have empowered hope as I use up the fuel poured out for me in the Holy Spirit. Even if I serve until the day I die, even if I say all the right words, I will never save a single soul. This is the Holy Spirit’s job.

In my youth I was presented with an evangelistic truth to memorize: “Successful witnessing is sharing Christ in the power of the Holy

Spirit and leaving the results with God.” He is able to do immeasurably more than I could even ask or begin to imagine, according to his power that is at work within me (Ephesians 3:20). I can rely on Him to persevere to eternity.

My childhood friend and I would play at one or the other of our homes after school. As supper time drew near we each would walk the other halfway home. Even at our young ages we were inspired by a message on a plaque in her home, and used it as a meter for our four-block-walk: “Only one life, ‘twill soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.” The rhythmic lilt of the words propelled us homeward. Because of Christmas we can persevere with hope for our assignment to escort our Learjet home.

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



— Jeannie Brandt
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