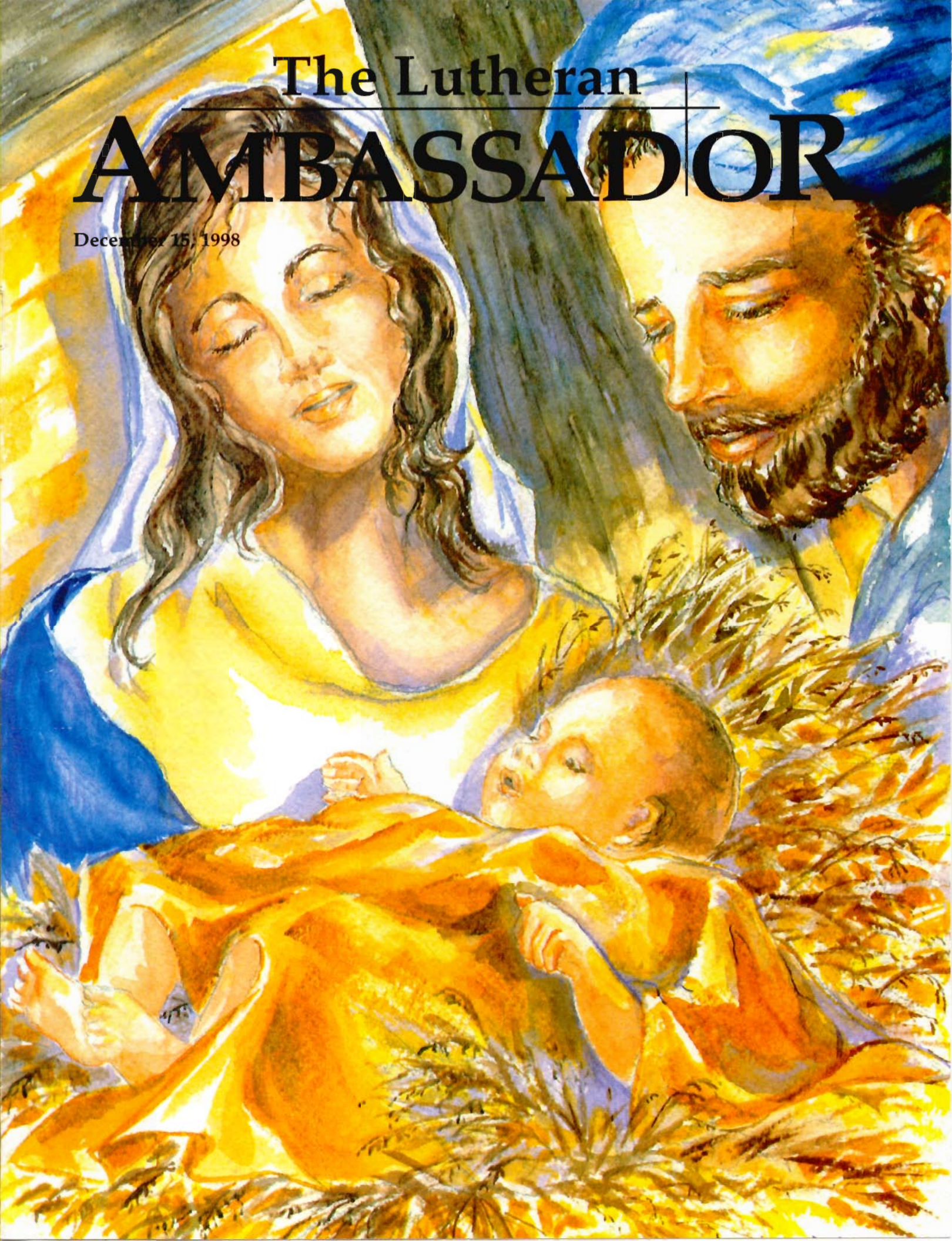


# The Lutheran AMBASSADOR

December 15, 1998





# THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

December 15, 1998  
Volume 36, Number 16



The magazine of the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, 3110 East Medicine Lake Blvd., Minneapolis, Minnesota 55441. (612) 545-5631

**Editor:** Rev. Craig Johnson  
**Assistant to the Editor:** Solveig Hjermstad  
**Editorial Board:** Rev. John Mundfrom, Oryen Benrud, Rev. Jerry Moan.

## CONTENTS

It's different now p. 5

Jesus came and our  
worship is transformed p. 6

How glad I am each  
Christmas eve p. 14

Cover art © by Doris McDowell-Masters, Lake Stevens, Washington.

### The Lutheran Ambassador

(USPS 588-620 ISSN 0746-3413)

is published every three weeks except monthly in June and July (16 issues per year) by the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations.

### For editorial inquiries and information:

The Lutheran Ambassador, Box 446, Bruce, SD 57220-0446; 605-627-5188; fax 605-627-9254; e-mail [craigj@teleport.com](mailto:craigj@teleport.com) [wshjerm@brookings.net](mailto:wshjerm@brookings.net)

### For subscription changes and information:

The Lutheran Ambassador, 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd., Minneapolis, Minnesota 55441. 612-545-5631.

### Subscriptions rates:

\$15.00 a year, Group Rate, U. S.

\$16.00 a year, Individual, U. S.

\$18.00 a year, International

Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, MN and additional mailing office.

**Postmaster:** Send address changes to *The Lutheran Ambassador*, 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd., Minneapolis, MN 55441

## AN ENCOURAGING WORD

### Caring enough to send the very best

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

**A** few years ago one of the greeting card companies promoted their Christmas cards with the slogan, "When you care enough to send the very best." The message they were trying to get across was simple. If you really cared about someone, you would send them the very best. you would send one of their greeting cards at Christmas time.

Two thousand years ago there was one who cared for us enough that He sent the very best. It wasn't just a Christmas card with a warm, cozy greeting and beautiful picture on the front. It was a gift that was desperately needed and of the finest quality.

Every human has a desperate need. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We have rebelled against our Creator. The result of our rebellion is death (Romans 6:23). In spite of our rebellion, God sent us a needed gift. He sent His Son to accept the punishment we deserved for our sin. Because God punished Jesus, we can have eternal life. God cared enough to send the very best, and the gift we needed.

The gift was of the finest quality. When we love someone, we try to send the best gift we can afford, even if it means we sacrifice to send it. It shows our love. The sacrificial gift offered to us was God Himself. Isaiah looked into the future and prophesied about this gift saying, "For to us a child is

born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God" (Isaiah 9:6). God could have shown us His love by sending us many things. He could have sent an angel, a man, a diamond, a greeting card. But God cared enough to send His best. He came Himself.

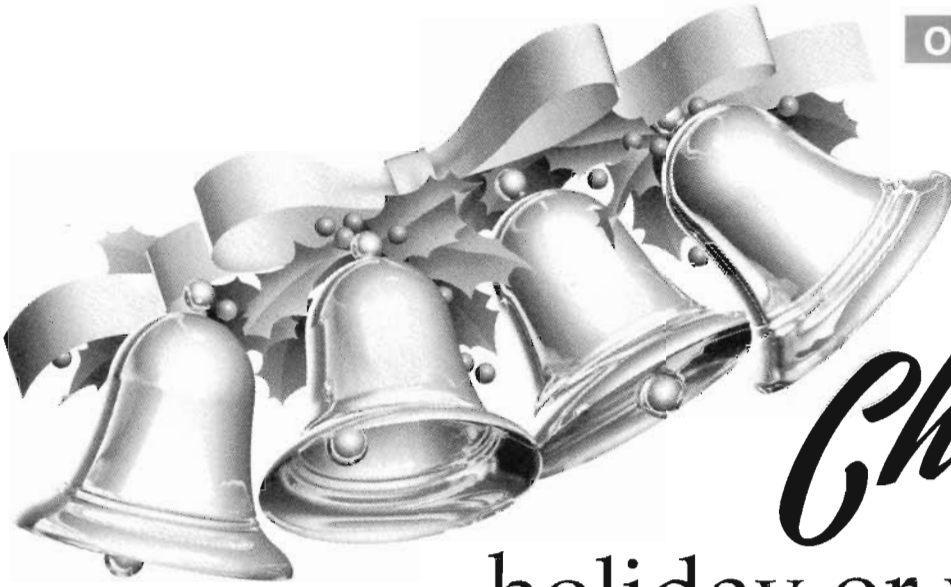
The ransom for sin was so costly, nothing else would do. No mere man could have ransomed us from sin. Psalm 49 explains this fact saying, "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him — the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough — that he should live on forever and not see decay ... But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself." The price to pay for our sin was so great that nothing else was adequate. Therefore, God came Himself.

He sent what we needed. It is complete. I'm glad He didn't just send a greeting card. Aren't you?

Instead He sent His best. He sent the Son.



— **Pastor Del Pamer**  
**Faith Lutheran**  
**Shakopee, Minnesota**



# Christmas

## holiday or vacation?

Will your Christmas be a holiday or a vacation?

"I prefer the Canadian custom of saying holiday rather than vacation," my seminary professor once declared. The word "vacation" is related to the word "vacant" or empty, meaning a period of rest and freedom from activity, while a "holiday" is literally a "holy day" or a religious festival.

Some would have to honestly admit that Christmas for them is neither a vacation nor a holiday. For many the days of December are so filled with preparations and activity that we are relieved to see them pass. A vacation? Certainly not!

Often, one could hardly call it a true holiday, either, as there is little room for the Babe of Bethlehem in the midst of His birthday celebration.

I wish you both a holiday and a vacation this Christmas season. First and foremost, we must take time to worship the newborn King and make it a real "holy day," set apart from all the days of the year in honor of God's gift to us in His Son Jesus Christ.

May we also take time to rest ... a real vacation ... protecting the quiet times of fellowship with family and friends that will make memories to enjoy throughout the year.

"Good news ... of great joy" (Luke 2:10) so the angel proclaimed. With the angelic choir we sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace ..." (Luke 2:14).



— *Pastor*  
*Robert L. Lee*

*He was in the world,  
and though the world was made  
through him, the world did not  
recognize him. He came to  
that which was his own, but  
his own did not receive him.*

*Yet to all  
him, to  
believed in  
he gave  
to become*



*who received  
those who  
his name,  
the right  
children*

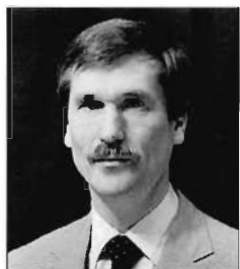
*of God —*

*The Word became flesh and made  
his dwelling among us.*

*We have seen his glory, the glory  
of the One and Only, who came  
from the Father, full of grace  
and truth.*

*— John 1:10-12, 14*

# It's different now



— *Pastor Jim Fugleberg*  
*St. Paul's Lutheran*  
*Fargo, North Dakota*

Jesus came, and life isn't the same anymore.

Much conformity to the world takes place at Christmas.

The reality, however, is that Christmas celebrates an event through which God intends to transform our lives.

## — OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD —

Through Christ's coming our relationship to God can be transformed, because of the atoning work Jesus came to do. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." God could perform that reconciliation, because Jesus, who had come in the flesh, suffered and died as a perfect sacrifice for sin (see II Corinthians 5:15-21).

## — OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD —

Jesus, by becoming a man, transforms our knowledge of God and hence, our confidence in approaching Him. John 1:18 says, "No man hath seen God at any time. The only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him." Jesus said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). If Jesus had not come, and we had known only the law, our picture of God would have not been complete. John the Baptist said, "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

God revealed Himself to Moses as "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7), but Jesus came and fleshed it out in His life.

Who would have guessed that God would come and wash men's dirty feet? Who would have thought, when the woman was taken in adultery, that Jesus would have silenced her accusers and said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more" (John 8:11). Who, in their loftiest conception of God, would have dreamed of a God who would be crucified because of His love for mankind?

Jesus lived among men as a man, and people actually talked to Him. They saw how He lived. They saw His power to work miracles. They knew His love for them. They saw His care for people. They heard His prayers. Jesus, by His demonstration of the character of God, assures us of a compassionate response from God when we come to Him with our needs and failings.

## — OUR TEMPTATIONS —

The Incarnation, Christ's coming to earth, transforms our temptations, because Jesus, by coming in the flesh, understands our lives. Hebrews 2:18 says, "For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour (help) them that are tempted." Later in Hebrews 4:15, the author encourages us, "We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." When we are tempted to sin, we can know that Jesus knows what it is like. He never fell into sin, but He could feel what our flesh would be prone to do in each tempting situation.

When the devil tempted Him to turn stones into bread, Jesus was actually physically hungry. When Peter exclaimed that never should Jesus be crucified, and Jesus rebuked him, Jesus' human flesh no more wanted to undergo the pain than you or I would. "Let this cup pass from me" would have been His insistence, were it not for His complete submission to the will of the Father.

So when we are tempted, we don't have to be afraid to call out to Jesus for help. The very next verse in the book of Hebrews says, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (4:16).

## — OUR FEARS —

The Incarnation of Christ transforms our fears. Jesus stilled the storm. He calmed the sea. He fed the multitude. God dwells in awesome power. But Jesus demonstrated that His power is directed for the help of His failing children, not for their destruction. "Fear not, ... for unto you is born ... a Savior, which is Christ, the Lord."

As we celebrate Christmas this year, may we remember the wonderful transformation that God brings to our lives through Christ. And as we daily look to His grace, and live that transformation, may Christmas and our entire lives be all that God intends them to be.



# Jesus came and our worship is transformed



— Joshua Skogerboe  
Emmaus Lutheran  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Artwork by Teresa A. Fehrenbach  
St. Olaf Lutheran, Montgomery, Illinois

W

orship is a God-given drive that we cannot produce — and cannot deny. It is a need as natural and as insistent as our need for food and breath.

This was God's design, for us to sense our incompleteness when we are not intimately relating to Him. It is what we have been created for, what **you** have been created for.

There has never been a tribe or people group, however remote from civilization they may be, who did not worship something. In its dictionary definition, we see worship simply as the act of "ascribing worth to, bowing down to, or giving homage to" something or someone. Yet there is a void that cannot be filled, neither in the hearts of the unchurched or the hearts of believers, without intimacy in worship with Abba Father through a living relationship with Jesus Christ. Without Jesus, worship is an exercise in futility.

A few years ago, Pastor John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, spoke to a conference about the drive God has given every person to be a worshipper. "There are two great passions in the universe," he said. "God's passion to be glorified and man's passion to be satisfied. However, these two do not need to conflict. They can

come to simultaneous fulfillment through worship, because God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in Him alone."

This is true. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Our reaction to that truth brings about a response: worship.

Biblical worship is fulfilling, but for many that is not the case. Many people within the church, along with the unbelieving majority, sense a lack of connection in their worship, an unfulfilled longing to meet God, even when they have assurance of salvation and attend church regularly.

I certainly have experienced this. I have known times where my faith felt more religious than relational, more programmatic than passionate. I think that is because we often do not have a clear biblical understanding of what worship really means.

More complex than the dictionary definition given earlier, "worship" in the Bible is presented in a myriad of expressions; some physical, some internal, some musical, and some spoken. Sometimes worship in the Bible is reverent and hushed. Other times it is described as exuberant and celebratory. There is a time for silence, and there is a time for shouting. There is a time to fall prostrate before Him and a time to dance before Him with childlike joy. But one thing



is clear: whenever we see expressions of worship described in the Bible, they are always in **response** to the love and grace of God.

God loved us first, and we respond in love for Him (I John 4:10,19). God's Word says "there is no one righteous; not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:10, 23).

But God has provided a way to be released from sin and guilt through the shed blood of His only son, Jesus Christ: "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). When we believe that God loves us deeply and accept the truth of the gospel, our natural reaction is worship. Grace and faith in Christ are integral parts of our worship life.

God's people have been worshipping Him for thousands of years. He is the Almighty I Am, unchanging Love, the King of Glory, and the Author of every good thing. As people through the ages have come in contact with His love and grace, they have responded with expressions of worship.

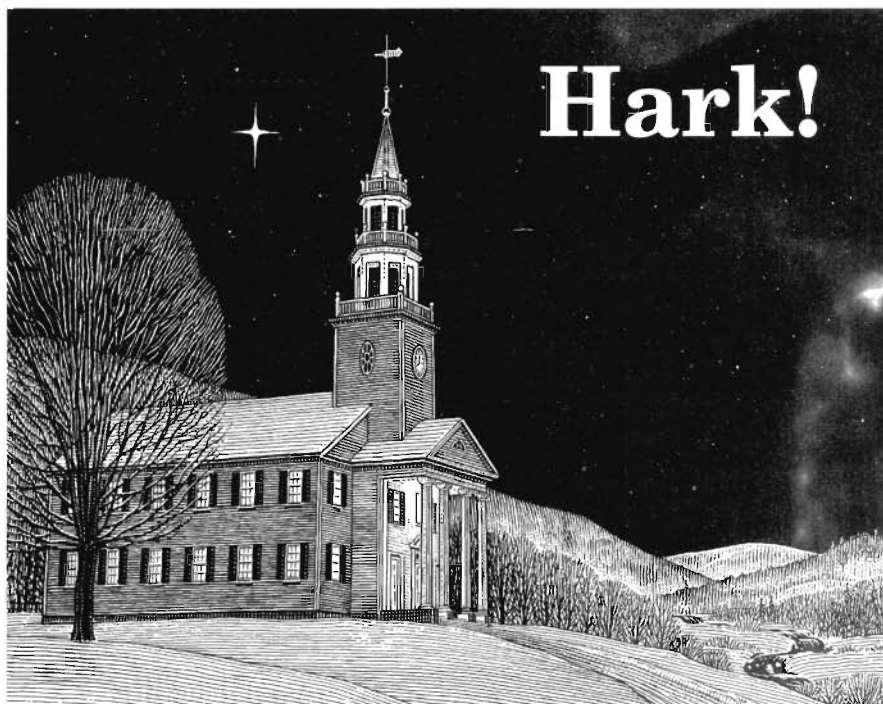
Jesus Christ coming to walk among us and die for our sins has redefined our worship. Although God is unchanging, He has provided for us access as His children and as a royal priesthood into His very presence. As He saves us He calls us to a passionate pursuit of Him, seeking His face and longing to spend time with Him. "Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and so worship God with rever-

ence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:28-29).

Before the coming of the Messiah, the Israelites used to rely on high priests to enter the Holy of Holies, where God's presence was manifest, as intermediaries and representatives for them. But when Christ died on Calvary, the veil separating God's people from His presence in the holy of holies was torn in two, giving us full, free access to Him (Matthew 27:51).

Jesus Christ radically redefined our relationship to God through His sacrifice and the new covenant. Chapters 8 to 10 of Hebrews lay a foundation for understanding our access to relationship with God in worship. We now have a High Priest who ever lives in us and intercedes for us before the throne of God. We can come boldly into His presence, because that is why we have been saved. We have been created and reborn to worship, giving glory to God for His grace and love. "But you are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God **that you may** declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness and into His wonderful light" (I Peter 2:9, emphasis mine). True fulfillment of the urge we human beings have for relationship with God and a purpose for living can only be found in Christ. Jesus alone satisfies.

**"We have been created and reborn to worship, giving glory to God for His grace and love."**



The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn  
King: Peace on earth,  
and mercy mild, God  
and sinners recon-  
ciled." With the angelic  
host proclaim, "Christ  
is born in Bethlehem."  
Hark! the herald  
angels sing, "Glory to  
the newborn King."

— Charles Wesley  
AMBASSADOR Hymnal no. 20



## Sensible and sane

One month before Christmas  
and I am happy to say,  
I am not harried;  
I am not dismayed.

From the top of my shopping list  
to the bottom of my wastebasket,  
I plan to be sensible;  
I plan to remain sane.

Prophet's words of repentance and hope  
will be my daily focus;  
angel's proclamation of coming events  
will dominate my thoughts.

This year I have promised  
to allow shepherds to guide me;  
this year I intend to hear  
Mary's faithfulness and Joseph's steadfastness.

One month before Christmas  
and I am pleased to report,  
the Christ Child lives in my day,  
may He live your day, too!

copyright by Roger L. Tappert, 1993  
St. Mark's Lutheran  
Indianapolis, Indiana



# Don't go

# WUTS



**T**his time of the year we likely have heard the familiar strains: "City sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in holiday style: in the air there's a feeling of Christmas." Perhaps you have merrily whistled this tune as you leisurely glanced at your almost completed shopping list before slipping into the department store where a smiling, relaxed clerk offers to help you.

Or not?!

Recently I found myself at a major shopping mall buying a birthday gift for my husband. The number of cars in the parking ramp and my exasperating hunt for an empty space, gave me a clue as to what was waiting for me in the stores. And it wasn't even Thanksgiving yet!

As I made my purchases, I looked around at the busy clerks, the press of the shoppers and cringed as I thought of the days ahead.

What is Christmas? Does the rush of finding the perfect gifts (most of us possess already more than enough), getting to holiday parties and even preparing for the greatest Sunday school performance in our congregation's history, absorb our celebration of the birth of Christ Jesus?

Over a hundred years ago, Charles Dickens in his "A Christmas Carol," touched a real malady of our society today. Old Jacob Marley's ghost confesses to Scrooge,

"My spirit never walked beyond our counting house — mark me — in life my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money-changing hole; ... At this time of the rolling year, I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted *me*?"

Our busy sidewalks dressed in holiday style so easily trap us in the secular celebration and our confession sometimes may not be too different than Jacob Marley's.

Romans 12:1-2 talks about not being conformed to this world, but being transformed with renewed minds in Christ Jesus. As Christians should not our celebration of Christmas be different than the world's?

Perhaps our "To-Do List" needs a column beside it: a "Do-not-do List."

\*Do not get angry with the crowds. Pray for them.

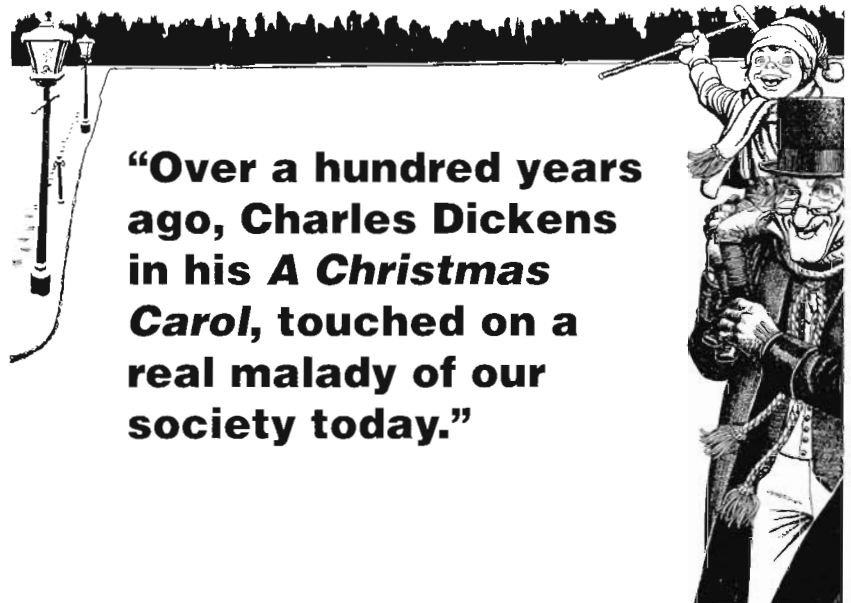
\*Do not succumb to the pressure to buy the "popular" gift for your child. Consider having your child buy gifts for needy children.

\*Do not grumble, "Merry Christmas." Give yourself an attitude check and ask the Lord for a merry heart.

\*Do not forget it's Jesus' birthday we celebrate. Concentrate on ways to enrich the celebration of the Savior's birth.

It's not the things we do but our heart's attitude as we do them that reveals our true spirit. Pray, using Romans 12:1-2, as we enter this Christmas time. May we bring glory to God as we celebrate a transformed Christmas.

— Sarah Bilitz  
Faith Lutheran  
Minneapolis, Minnesota,  
with Solveig Hjermstad,  
Assistant to the Editor,  
The Lutheran  
Ambassador



**"Over a hundred years ago, Charles Dickens in his *A Christmas Carol*, touched on a real malady of our society today."**

# Things are *not the same* but we're still celebrating Christmas!

— Nathan and Julie Monseth  
Dubai, United Arab Emirates



**C**“City sidewalks, busy sidewalks dressed in holiday style, in the air there’s a feeling of Christmas. Children laughing, people passing, meeting, smile after smile, and on every street corner you hear” — the call to prayer echoing from the many mosques in the Arab nation of the United Arab Emirates.

Life has changed!! As we sit down to write this article about how to celebrate Christmas even when far away from all that is familiar, you must know that we are not writing from experience. Our family moved to the United Arab Emirates a mere three months ago. Because we have never celebrated Christmas in the Middle East (or any place other than Minnesota for that matter), there have been many moments of wondering what we are going to do to make this a memorable Christmas for our family. Writing this article is going to be our way of thinking through how God would like for us to spend this precious holiday. We do so remembering that God will always meet His children and provide for their needs when we seek Him with all our heart, mind, and soul.

The United Arab Emirates became a nation on December 2, 1971. The seven unified emirates are located on the Arabian Peninsula on the eastern side of Saudi Arabia. Although recorded history in the United Arab Emirates is relatively short, archaeological discoveries have emerged to reveal ancient treasures such as King Solomon’s mines. Living in the second largest emirate of Dubai has given our family a new look on life and its many challenges. Eighty percent of the 2.5 million people in this little country, are not even native Arabs of the United

Arab Emirates. Foreigners from Pakistan, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and the United States, to name just a few, all have a part in creating the society as it is today.

Nameless streets are filled with people of different colors and class who hold different cultures and customs close to their hearts. Red and yellow, black and white are not all precious in each other’s eyes. Countless groups of men are seen being herded into pickup trucks, working manual labor seven days a week. The other part of the society lives in beautiful palaces surrounded by lush gardens and high cement walls so as to block out the harsh desert in which Dubai is situated. One part of society exists to be served; the other to serve.

With the passing of Halloween, Diwali (a Hindu festival of lights) and Thanksgiving, preparations have long been underway for the Christmas season in Dubai. White lights are spiraling up and down thousands of palm trees. Massive evergreen trees are being placed in the center of shopping malls and decorated with an abundance of lights



and holiday cheer. Santa Claus even makes an appearance at a nearby shopping center. However, by mid-December, all signs of Christmas will disappear in reverence to the beginning of Ramadan. Ramadan is the holy month in which Muslims commemorate the revelation of the Holy Koran. This year Ramadan, which is based on the lunar year, and Christmas overlap. During Ramadan, most shops and restaurants are not open from sunrise to sunset, and nobody is allowed to eat or drink in public until a canon sounds in the evening. It is a month of fasting and prayer that the Muslim people use to bring themselves closer to Allah.

The above description of December in Dubai is a far cry from what we are used to. As we think of years in the past, Christmas always meant many things to us: time with family, snow on the ground, Christmas programs at school and church, hours of shopping, snow, a tree chopping trip (say that ten times!), decorating our Christmas tree, snow, candlelight services, fondue with the Skordahls, meatballs and root-beer with the Monseths, reading the Christmas story from the Gospels, and more snow.

Today we are in the middle of the desert with no family, no snow (that isn't all bad), and living in an apartment too small to even put up a Christmas tree.

It seems we have a choice of two roads we can take this Christmas. The road Satan would prefer for us to take would be the road toward self-absorption. "What am I going to do this Christmas? I wish I were back in Minnesota."

Make no mistake about it, this is an extremely easy road to go down because we've done it numerous times during our brief stay in the United Arab Emirates. When we are focused on our own happiness, how can we focus on loving and thanking our Savior?

On the other road, we have the choice to celebrate the fact that God has brought us out into the desert to strip away all of the externals that we normally rely on to cele-

brate Christmas. Consequently, we can focus solely on the gift that was given to all of us at Christmas many years ago.

We have decided to take the second road. You have this choice also. Don't fool yourself into thinking you don't have a choice because your circumstances are too difficult. In Philippians we read of how Paul was beaten and lying in prison, and still able to make the choice to sing praises to God. "For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:11b-13).

Maybe God has brought you to a time of

**"On the other hand, we have the choice to celebrate the fact that God has brought us out into the desert to strip away all of the externals that we normally rely on to celebrate Christmas."**



wandering in your own desert this year. Are you dreading the approaching Christmas season because many of your external securities been removed? Tension in the family? Illness or death? Depression? Fears? Separation from family? Make the decision right now that you are going to take the second road along with us.

God loves you so much. With the strength and joy He is able to supply, this Christmas season can be a time of happiness and thankfulness. Rather than directing your attention horizontally to the circumstances around you, ask God to help you focus your thoughts and your worship vertically up to Christ and the gift He gave, in leaving His home and coming to us.



(The Monseths recently began teaching at an American school in Dubai.)

# Experience transformed relationships



— *Pastor Frank Cherney*  
*Living Faith and*  
*Body of Christ*  
*Lutheran Parish*  
*Tucson, Arizona*

**S**ome of us want to be with the crowd so badly we end up in a mess. Once a spider built a beautiful web in an old house. He kept it clean and shiny so that flies would patronize it. The minute he got a “customer” he would clean up on him so the other flies would not get suspicious.

Then one day this fairly intelligent fly came buzzing by the clean spider web. Old man spider called out, “Come in and sit.” But the fairly intelligent fly said, “No, sir. I don’t see other flies in your house, and I am not going in alone!”

But then he saw on the floor below a large crowd of flies dancing around on a piece of brown paper. He was delighted! He was not afraid if lots of flies were doing it. So he came in for a landing.

Just before he landed, a bee zoomed by, saying, “Don’t land there, stupid! That’s fly-paper!” But the fairly intelligent fly shouted back, “Don’t be silly. Those flies are dancing. There’s a big crowd there. Everybody is doing it. That many flies can’t be wrong!”

Well, you know what happened.

Second Corinthians 6:14 says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?”

God wants us to build relationships with the lost but keep a **loving distance**. This distance is for the keeping of the believer, as Scripture warns us: “But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

On the other hand, a relationship may help win the lost. If we really love the lost as Christ does, we will seek to build relationships that create opportunities to share the gospel.

## With God’s people

When a person becomes a Christian, he or she is not left on their own in the world. Even though our relationship with Christ is personal, it’s never meant to be private. We’re now members of God’s family. Ephesians 2:19 says, “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.”

Listen to the testimony of one fellow: “When Jesus came into my life He trans-

formed my relationship to the Church. Before Jesus lived in my heart, attending church wasn’t what I wanted. It seemed that most people there were straightlaced and not very happy. Others just closed their eyes. Mom called it ‘resting my eyes.’ The songs were different too. Few sang. I supposed they didn’t know them either. The singing there was kind of half-hearted and monotone. Now that I think about it, the speaker was like that too. Everyone seemed happier after church was over, including me.

“But after I accepted Jesus Christ into my heart by faith at my kitchen table, church really changed. Now it’s like no matter where I go and meet with believers, we’re family and I love that. Now the sermon is a message to me from God’s Word.”

Maybe the church service did change, but more likely God changed a person! He became part of a new people, a diversity of individuals and a family of families redeemed by God through faith in Jesus Christ. These people share with each other, in worship, in service, in reaching the lost, in the sacraments, in growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. All this is because of the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God.

## With repentance

Christ doesn’t just do “home improvements.” He transforms, He remodels. And with change comes discomfort.

There may be some of you who feel uncomfortable when I say, “Your thoughts on wanting out of your marriage may be





thoughts from the devil. It's time to repent."

You might cringe a little with this: "To love your career more than you family is wrong." What you love the most is demonstrated by how you spend your time and resources.

Do some of you men have to humbly agree this applies to you: "Your home is falling apart because you are falling apart? You haven't been the spiritual leader God wants you to be."

Young people may be upset to hear: "You will face some drastic consequences if you continue to date and want to marry a non-Christian. It's time to repent." Repentance is not only a change of attitude. It is also a change of behavior.

## **Let Christ build your home**

A Christian home means building a strong foundation of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). It means each member letting God's Word determine their role in the family, taking spiritual responsibility. A Christian family experiences the grace and empowering of the Holy Spirit at work in relationships.

The world says, a strong family is built on education, position and prosperity. There's nothing wrong with them. They just can't take God's place. Your family will not be strong because of material things. Its strength is because of who we are in Christ. We've got to make a choice — "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!" No matter what others choose, we've got to make a choice.

I like the way Psalm 127:1 puts it, "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain." If you are trying to build your home without the Lord, it will fall apart. If He is not Lord of your life, then you are headed in the wrong direction. If Jesus Christ is not Lord of your home, then your work is in vain. If you're not letting Christ build your home, then don't expect restoration or transformation to take place.

Singles, newlyweds, parents, children, and even grandparents, don't wait to start building a Christian home. Begin now! Purpose in your heart that by God's grace, you will serve the Lord alone! What better time than at Christmas to bow before the Savior who came, seek His forgiveness and rise renewed in His power to build transformed relationships that honor His name.



**O Thou, who by a star didst guide  
The wise men on their way,  
Until it came and stood beside  
The place where Jesus lay;**

**Although by stars Thou dost not lead  
Thy servants now below,  
Thy Holy Spirit, when they need,  
Will show them how to go.**

**As yet we know Thee but in part,  
But still we trust Thy word  
That blessed are the pure in heart,  
For they shall see the Lord.**

**O Savior, give us then Thy grace  
To make us pure in heart,  
That we may see Thee, face to face,  
Hereafter as Thou art.**

— John Mason Neale  
*O Thou, Who By A Star Didst Guide*  
AMBASSADOR Hymnal no. 56

— by *Ingard Henriksen*  
from *Sjomannensmisjo-*  
*nens Julehefte,*  
translated by  
Pastor Raynard Huglen  
Newfolden, Minnesota

I am sitting and looking at the little tree here where I am writing and thoughts go back to that Christmas Eve when it was lit up for the first time.

No matter how old we get, Christmas comes back each year as something fresh and new in power about the timeless message which has created it. But Christmas is like a most precious pearl — we want to put it in a frame to enhance its splendor. Christmas tree and the Christmas lights, Christmas and decorated tree — and traditional customs which each individual forms out of personal memories and experiences.

In any case I take that as the reason why each Christmas for twenty years, the little tree has stood on our parlor table. It is there because there is a story tied to it.

## Memories of a Christmas away from home

# How glad I am each Christmas Eve

**U**nlike the usual trees, these needles don't drop and it doesn't end up on the trash heap when Christmas is over. No, this tree is packed carefully in a box and is just as fresh and pretty when it is taken out again, this year as 20 years before.

Such a Christmas tree has obviously not been cut in the woods, but in all its simplicity came from one of Göteborg's large stores.

In 1952 my wife and I had to suspend our preparations for our own Christmas at home to travel to Göteborg as emergency help at the seaman's church.

Far from considering it a sacrifice, we viewed the request as a gift of grace that yet one more time we would be able to share in the seamen's Christmas in a seaman's church.

A hotel room became our home for some weeks and to be sure it was quiet and cozy there, but it was like something was missing when we got up in the morning and when we came home late at night. If only there was an ever so little Christmas tree with lights aglow!

We didn't really think we could troop up in the hotel with a real Christmas spruce or fir, so we found the solution among Christmas tree decorations on a store shelf. To be sure, it had no fragrance, but the ten-inch-high tree was skillfully cut

out of fir wood and the carved branches had the right needle color with a delicate dusting of snow. On the top a star glittered and when the five small lights on the outer branches were lit, it was as though they lit up the whole room with the light and stars and Christmas!

Five o'clock was nearing and the deafening noise of traffic around the seaman's church had stilled, at any rate, so much so that we for once could hear the delicate chimes of the clock on the little church ring in the





festive season. The simple, but so blessed home — like a barrack church temporarily raised right after the war, gradually filled to the last standing place.

First and foremost, there was a large congregation of seamen, but there were also local residents, essentially Norwegian domestic workers and students, and some Swedish friends. Two large Christmas trees shone and glittered almost up to the ceiling, and the altar and window frames were decorated with flowers and holly.

Seaman's pastor Roal Hede-gaard-Jacobsen stood in the pulpit. In the suspenseful, expectant stillness, he read the Christmas story and had just begun his sermon. Then something began to happen, something so completely apart from the planned.

A little four-year-old, safely seated on mother's lap, suddenly broke in with "Jeg er saa glad hver julekveld!" (How glad I am each Christmas Eve!)

Loudly, gloriously joyful and unaffected the child sang the one stanza. Mother "shushed" desperately, but completely to no avail — fortunately, for wasn't it for just such a little expression of full-throated Christmas joy that we all sat there and hoped to experience that Christmas night?

The seaman's pastor did the only reasonable thing — he paused and let the little happy singer replace the sermon for a few seconds.

But our Lord had decided for one time to make His own Christmas liturgy that night. Before the pastor had resumed preaching, a little three-year-old girl saw her opportunity to slip away from her mother, hurried all the way up to the pulpit and stood there with her little pointer finger in her mouth, staring at the pastor with large wondering eyes.

Perhaps thoughts are allowed to go back to that Christmas Day in London fifty years ago and the small son of seaman's pastor Heuch? Naturally, Heuch was wearing the white festival robe of the season, when the boy's question rang out

loudly to his mother: "Mama, is Papa going to preach in his night shirt today?"

Whatever the thoughts of the little girl in Göteborg were, fortunately she didn't put them in words, but after a couple of minutes in deep concentration, she suddenly was at the piano. While the pastor and congregation held their breaths, she lifted her pointer finger over the keys. Fortunately, there were angels in the church that night because the finger tried no tempting touch, but the little one hurried down the church floor again.

To Mother?

Oh no, she stopped before a young sailor and reached out her arms to him, wanting to sit on his lap. At first, the boy seemed annoyed, but then he put her on his lap and she sat there quietly as a light with her small chubby arms around his neck.

**It was as though a light were kindled in the sailor's face as he sat with his unexpected Christmas gift. Needy and homesick, he had found his way to the church from the ship, but his thoughts were at home in a small community on Norway's west coast. And now — didn't a little child sit upon his lap with her arms around his neck, a little God-provided token of greeting from Father and Mother and brothers and sisters back in Norway?**

Without knowing it, a little three-year-old built a bridge over the ocean that Christmas night in Göteborg seaman's church — just as a little Child built a bridge between earth and heaven some 2000 years ago.

**The seaman's pastor smiled when we spoke of the service afterward. "It wasn't easy to stand in the pulpit tonight. Our Lord illustrated the Christmas gospel much better than I preached it."**

After the service there was a Christmas fellowship in the reading room for the lonely sailors and the lonely on land. Again, a bridge was built through the Word preached, conversation at the festive table, songs around the Christmas tree and Christmas packages from the homeland. Wasn't it bridge span on bridge span which rose up for tired and longing pilgrim wanderers? It's a bridge which both brought them home here on earth and to the eternal home in heaven, where God in His great grace will gather us when all storms have been stilled, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

It was midnight before we came home to our little hotel room and could turn on the five lights on our own little tree. Every Christmas for these last twenty years, they are lit and remind me of the long succession of unspeakable joyous and glad Christmases I have celebrated with thousands upon thousands of seamen — all the way back to the first old church in Buenos Aires in 1917. The years have given me so infinitely much more than I myself have been able to give.

Were I to mention any especially great gift these years have given me, it must be this: that I have become so small and poor and God is so infinitely great and rich! Perhaps the greatest of times when I understood this was when I myself couldn't stand and God accomplished the work I had not strength to do!



# Moved by the *Messiah*

— Barb Schierkolk  
Aguascalientes, Mexico

“... but as the tenor began to sing, “He Shall Feed His Flock,” something deeper began to happen and I started to cry. Not only were the lyrics beautiful in Spanish, but Jesus, my tender Shepherd, was speaking to me.”

**A**s a missionary kid growing up in Japan and Australia, things did not always feel like Christmas outside our home, but inside was a different story. There were certain traditions that my mom and dad carried with them literally around the world and back. There was the Advent calendar with the windows we never tired of opening; the nut and pine cone Advent wreath whose candles we faithfully lit each year; the nativity scene with the cracked but beloved figurines; and then there was the music.

How we looked forward to the day each year when our parents gave us their blessing to put on the first Christmas record. I have to confess that as children we definitely preferred the lighter music of Christmas, but even then I remember being truly affected by the “Hallelujah Chorus.” I was certain that this was how the angels had sounded when they sang to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem.

As I grew older, my appreciation of “Handel’s Messiah” grew as well and I always looked forward to any opportunity to see it performed in concert. While we were in Chicago some friends asked if we were interested in free tickets to a performance of “Handel’s Young Messiah.” They mentioned that the seats were apparently “pretty good.” That was an understatement. We found ourselves sitting directly behind the performers themselves, feeling moved all over again as we listened to the familiar songs. As we stood for the “Hallelujah Chorus,” I felt completely overwhelmed by the awesome majesty of God and His story of saving love that we had experienced once again through “The Messiah.” I was pretty certain that no other performance would ever come close to this one — but then we moved to Mexico.

It was our first Christmas here in Aguascalientes and I was bravely trying to create the same atmosphere that my parents had done for my siblings and me. The same Advent wreath and well-traveled nativity scene were in place. The tree was decorated and the Christmas music was playing. But on the inside I found myself battling waves of homesickness. In light of my struggle, I was thrilled to learn that “Handel’s Messiah” would be performed for the first time in Aguascalientes. We eagerly made plans to go.

As we entered the auditorium, dressed in our Christmas best, I felt excited. It wasn’t that I was expecting musical perfection or even the same emotional lift of prior experiences, but God was giving me a piece of home; a piece of my Christian, Christmas heritage and I was so grateful. This would have been enough but as the tenor began to sing, “He Shall Feed His Flock,” something deeper began to happen and I started to cry. Not only were the lyrics beautiful in Spanish, but Jesus, my tender Shepherd, was speaking to me. It seemed that we were experiencing so much more than a great musical work — we were experiencing Jesus, the Messiah.

As the climax of the program approached, I remember whispering to Todd, “Do you suppose the audience knows that we stand for the ‘Hallelujah Chorus?’” As the familiar introduction began, it appeared they did not. As far as we could tell, no one was standing. In that split second, just as I heard Todd say, “We’ve got to stand,” I saw Dan and Debbie Giles rising to their feet. We stood by their side as others began to stand around the auditorium. Not everyone stood, not even the majority. Standing that night was like a profession of faith. We were standing for Christ our King. As I considered what a privilege it was to stand up for Jesus in an orchestra hall in Mexico, I found myself thinking once again that surely there could be no other performance of “The Messiah” that could move me like this one had. We’ll see!

Two years have passed and Christmas once again lies right around the corner. I’m waiting impatiently for our family’s predetermined day when we can break out the Christmas cassettes and fill our home with the glad sounds recalling the night of our Savior’s birth. I’m very tempted to cheat. If I do it will probably be the music of Handel’s famous piece that rings in the season a little early. I suppose that won’t matter much because it is music of our Messiah that fills our hearts every day of the year.









# The Christmas

**M** My earliest recollection of Christmas goes back to 1910. I had then passed my fourth birthday and we lived in the homesteader's sod house on the prairie.

My Christmas present that year was a small oval mirror glued to a cardboard backing. On the rim of the cardboard, which extended beyond the rim of the mirror itself, were glued a number of tiny white seashells, to accentuate whatever one might see in the mirror itself. I thought I had never in my whole long life seen anything more beautiful than this mirror. My folks must have paid a pretty penny for it.

The prices that small town merchants had paid for (and charged for) items they had for sale in their stores were usually indicated on the back side of the item itself, or on a small tab fastened to the object for sale.

I early learned that my parents had paid 10 cents for this mirror, for that was written with an indelible pencil on the back side of the cardboard backing. But for a long time I was mystified by the capital letter "L" impressed over the 10 cents. I thought that this might represent what the merchant had paid, but I had no way of determining what this might be.

Years later my boyhood friend had a sister who worked as a clerk at this store. She knew that a ten-letter word was used, each letter representing a number indicated by the position that each letter had in the code word. "L" was the third letter in this word, and represented the number 3. Three cents was ostensibly the cost of the mirror the merchant had paid. He had made a tremendous profit by selling it for ten cents, but I was well-pleased that my parents did not think the cost was too exorbitant a price to pay for such a Christmas present. I had a small five-cent

piece myself and who knew that if I were given time enough I might acquire another, though I was not too sure that five and five would add up to ten.

My mother permitted me to have a secret hiding place for the mirror; it was in the top shelf of her dresser drawer — among her own secret possessions. My older brother had likewise received an identical mirror to the one I was given. He too, was accorded the privilege of secreting his mirror in the same place as I did.

up positions along either side of this broad shaft of light and wage warfare by deflecting the rays of sunshine into each other's faces. The one who was thus attacked would have to duck, dodge or move to keep the sunlight out of his face.

At other times we would turn our mirrors to more peaceful uses, and which may have been the prime purpose for which these mirrors were made in the first place. I could sit what seemed to be by the hour (though I have later learned that a child's attention span is much short-



As the drab days of the rest of that winter wore away and dribbled into spring, we would ask Mother if we might take out our mirrors to amuse ourselves with them. Invariably she permitted us to do that, but always with the warning to be careful so as not to break them. This advice was really superfluous. No soldier in the king's army fondled his rifle with finer felicity than we our mirrors. We staged many battle through the rest of that winter with our mirrors as the weapons. When the winter sun sent a horizontal shaft of light through the south window of the sod house, we would take

er than that) and admire myself.

I had not known before how handsome I really was. The mirror was too small for me to see the entirety of my face at one and the same time. When I held the mirror longitudinally I could see only the western hemisphere of my face, and moving it slightly to the east, I could observe the eastern hemisphere. Similarly, if I turned the mirror laterally, I could observe only the upper or the lower halves of my face at one time. To get an adequate image of my appearance I had to take several views of myself, one-fourth of a face at one time,

# mirrors

— by Dr. Iver Olson  
former AFLTS Dean  
Minneapolis, Minnesota  
taken from *THE LUTHERAN*  
AMBASSADOR, December 8, 1981

## Christmas memories from childhood in Saskatchewan

remember what I saw, move the mirror up or down, to the right or left, and then in my mind piece these parts to a composite whole in order to get a complete picture of what I looked like. I was positively attractive! At the time I had not learned of the stepmother who, according to the tale, would step up to the mirror on the wall with the question about who was the most beautiful of all; but her question was rapping on my consciousness for attention.

For the Christmas that was at hand, these two mirrors became part of the Christmas tree decorations. Fear replaced equanimity in my mind! What if the mirrors should fall? They never did, though they formed a part of the Christmas tree decorations for several Christmases thereafter.

My younger brother considered himself more fortunate than his older brothers. In 1910 he was given no mirror as a Christmas present. Instead he received a candy rooster made of solid chocolate. It was also equipped with a fine wire loop to facilitate its hanging on the tree as decoration.

On Christmas Eve, we moved the tree from its corner to the center of the room so that we could march around it. My brother was not too steady on his feet having just passed the age of three. As we marched around the tree he seemed to stumble a little and bump into the tree when he was on the dark side of the room. Later in the evening we discovered that the head and tail of this chocolate rooster had been bitten off.

Mother had to make the rest of the Christmas tree decorations herself. She wove little paper baskets to be hung on pieces of candy, shelled peanuts or other goodies. Father had come home from town a couple of

days before Christmas in 1910 with a couple of pounds of cranberries. Mother took the cord the man at the store had used to wrap grocery packages, used a darning needle and strung these cranberries on the cord. She had a long enough cranberry chain to reach several times about the tree. How it colored and enhanced that otherwise sparse tree.

After Christmas we had cranberry sauce for days! We children salvaged the cords and braided them together into suitable lengths for shoelaces. We were the only children

that Christmas who flashed red shoelaces at the gatherings.

As the days became years, the memory of the mirrors faded from our memories. Both Father and Mother passed away in 1944. A younger sister was left to bring order to the home place. She wrote to me asking the question: "What do you know about two mirrors left in Mother's top dresser drawer?"

Each of us received a mirror — a choice part of the inheritance from childhood.



Pictured are Shirley Sandberg and Margaret Tryggstad at Abiding Savior Lutheran Church in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with some of the 3500 shoeboxes of gifts gathered and loaded on a semi-trailer and sent to Minneapolis where they were flown to needy children in forty nations. For the second year, Abiding Savior was the South Dakota collection point for Operation Christmas Child, sponsored by Samaritan's Purse. Wendy Giebink and Erika Brandt coordinated over 30 volunteers in advertising, collecting, and shipping the boxes brought in by churches and individuals in the region.

**Joy to the world!  
the Lord  
is come!  
Let earth  
receive her  
King;  
Let every heart  
prepare Him  
room,  
And heaven and  
nature sing, ...**

— Isaac Watts  
*AMBASSADOR*  
Hymnal no. 18





**I** wonder if your first memories of Christmas are anything like mine? As I reflect, I begin to understand how many little things were the means of building my faith, and laid a solid foundation upon which my entire lifetime was established.

The gray chill of cloudy November days marked the end of bright October days of wonderful colored leaves and clear blue sky. Everyday after school it was my job to fill the kindling box for the kitchen cook stove and living room heater. My older brothers chopped, sawed and split the wood.

I remember coming into the kitchen with my arms full of sticks. It felt good to put down my load and warm my cold hands over the stove. When supper was ready I was hungry! Our house was very small and simply furnished. With a family that grew to include ten brothers and sisters, it was a busy place.

Soon after we had celebrated Thanksgiving our supper table conversation turned to planning how we would prepare for Christmas. We had been taught from our earliest days the real meaning of Christmas, and what fun it was to get ready for this special time. Now we could sing the Christmas songs while sitting around the table or standing around the pump organ. Older brothers and sisters would help the younger ones learn the words.

I remember being surprised when our mother began playing and singing alone a song that was new to us. She did everything else for us but I didn't know she could sing!

Our first decorations were pictures, carefully drawn, colored and cut out, which Mama helped us paste on each living room window. These would be of a manger with the star shining down on it, lighted candles, a Christmas tree, and green holly wreath with red berries. The real tree, a small cedar from our pasture, was set up on Christmas Eve and decorated with our home-made ornaments. The real candles

# Little things that built my faith at Christmas

— Eunice Will  
Immanuel Lutheran  
Springfield, Missouri

were in our two African candle holders. They were set on our dinner table which would have a white cloth for Christmas Day, covering the everyday oil cloth. Between the two candles were Mom's cut glass bowl filled with home-canned peaches, blackberries or apples.

At our one-room country school we finished lessons early to have time to practice for the Christmas program. This special evening brought together a crowd of parents and friends to visit and enjoy their children's efforts.

My favorite event was the Christmas Eve Sunday school program at our church. Each Saturday morning in December we practiced saying our parts, which together formed the Scripture narrative foretelling and announcing the birth of our Savior. And of course, we practiced singing those beautiful carols. Do you remember this one?

*"God's love eternal planned  
my redemption  
God's boundless mercy saves  
even me.  
God's love brought Jesus,  
gentle and faithful  
Seeking and saving that  
which was lost.  
Therefore, rejoice and praise  
His love eternal  
His boundless mercy saves  
even me."*

The candlelight church, the organ music and the singing of children, choir and congregation are still vivid in my memory. To me, even as a child, this was a "Holy Night!"

When the service was over, and all the "Merry Christmases" were exchanged, we all crowded back into our car, each of us children holding



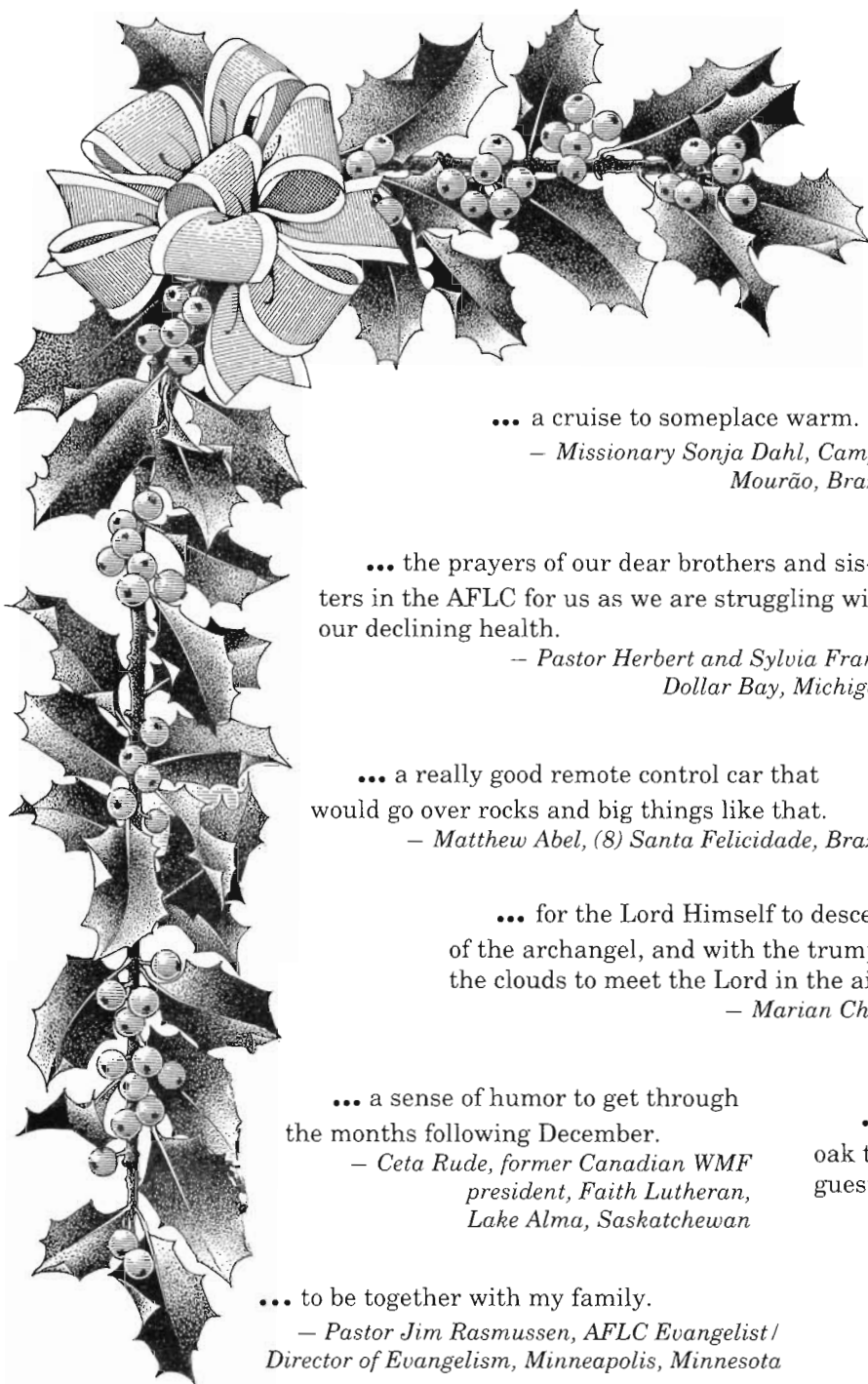
our own small white bag filled with candy, nuts and an orange! Daddy would drive home taking a longer route so we could see some of the beautiful light displays in town. Sometimes we would sing as we rode along the eight miles back to our home.

Our uncle's families in Nebraska would always send a box with something for everyone — mittens, caps, stockings and toys. We were all excited, but I especially remember Dad's smile when he unwrapped a nice ham — a very special treat in those days. Though the evening was quite late, and little heads would nod, there was still time for Daddy to read for us the Christmas Gospel and sing together, "Away in a Manger."

Memories stir up so much. There were a multitude of little things which taught us to not be "conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds." Today during this holiday season, hearts are still open and hungry. May we always look for opportunities to build true faith into our own lives and those of our family, friends, and all with whom we live and work.

A blessed Christmas to you all!





*The Lutheran Ambassador* editors did a casual survey in the AFLC. The people were asked to complete the following statement: ***All I want for Christmas is...***

- ... a cruise to someplace warm.  
— *Missionary Sonja Dahl, Campo Mourão, Brazil*
- ... the prayers of our dear brothers and sisters in the AFLC for us as we are struggling with our declining health.  
— *Pastor Herbert and Sylvia Franz, Dollar Bay, Michigan*
- ... a really good remote control car that would go over rocks and big things like that.  
— *Matthew Abel, (8) Santa Felicidade, Brazil*
- ... for the Lord Himself to descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God ... and to be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air — and to always be with the Lord.  
— *Marian Christopherson, Director of AFLC Parish Education, Minneapolis, Minnesota*
- ... a sense of humor to get through the months following December.  
— *Ceta Rude, former Canadian WMF president, Faith Lutheran, Lake Alma, Saskatchewan*
- ... to be together with my family.  
— *Pastor Jim Rasmussen, AFLC Evangelist / Director of Evangelism, Minneapolis, Minnesota*
- ... my whole family home for Christmas.  
— *Wilma Wissner, Ruthfred Lutheran Herald editor, Bethel Park, Pennsylvania*
- ... continued peace in my family.  
— *Mike Leddige, Beaverton, Oregon*
- ... our nation turning back to God.  
— *Kenneth Rolf, McIntosh, Minnesota*
- ... to quit running, stay home and enjoy it.  
— *Pastor Tom Olson, Naknek, Alaska*
- ... we got it just before Thanksgiving. It's an oak table big enough for the turkey and our guests.  
— *Pastor Philip and Hazelle Featherstone, retired AFLC pastor, Osceola, Wisconsin*
- ... a joyful celebration of Christ's birth.  
— *Pastor Ken Moland, Kirkland, Washington*

### Send us your programs

The Office of Parish Education is collecting original Christmas program scripts to keep on file. These would be available to other churches in the future who are looking for ideas. If you have created your own programs, please send a photocopy of your script to AFLC Parish Education, 3110 East Medicine Lake Boulevard, Minneapolis, MN 55441.

- ... a trip to Brazil to see the mission work firsthand.  
— *Karen Anderson, AFLC World Missions' secretary, Minneapolis, Minnesota*
- ... camping stuff, like strong ropes and anything camping.  
— *Andrew Abel, (11) Santa Felicidade, Brazil*
- ... to keep in focus the true meaning of Christmas.  
— *Sharon Bond, Helmar Lutheran Church secretary, Newark, Illinois*

# Requirements for a joyful Christmas celebration

**T**he world starts early and often telling us what we must have if we are going to truly celebrate Christmas. According to the messages we hear, certain kinds of food are necessary if Christmas is going to be joyful. The house needs to be tastefully decorated. You must be part of a loving and happy family gathering. Attendance at certain concerts, plays and productions is mandatory. Expensive and well wrapped gifts are to be given and received.

But what about those of us who don't have and won't have the things the world says we need? The aroma of fresh baked goodies isn't filling our homes. The decorations may be a little sparse. The family may have been gathered to be with Jesus and won't be gathering on this earth. Or maybe they will be gathering, and the fear is, if it's like past years, it'll be far from joyous. Maybe the wonderful holiday concerts and productions aren't happening where you live. Or maybe they are, but they're not something you can afford. Who you have to shop for and what you have to shop with may be rather minimal. You may not have a whole lot of packages under the tree with your name on them. Can you still celebrate Christmas?

The world would say, "No." But Jesus says, "Yes!"

Too often we let the world tell us how to celebrate Christmas. The world never stops giving orders. It says, "Do this. Buy that." It never says, "That's enough."

We'll never have all that is thought to be necessary for an ideal Christmas, if the world is our guide. The gifts won't turn out to be as great as advertised. The food often doesn't taste as good as what Grandma made. You can't get the decorations looking quite right. The musicians at the concert don't hit all their notes. And somebody doesn't getting along with somebody else at the family gathering.

But you can still have a joyful Christmas, if you look to Jesus for direction as to how to celebrate.

The first Christmas celebration involved shepherds hearing the good news proclaimed to them by angels that "a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11, NIV). Their response was to go to Bethlehem to see what had happened. They went to see Jesus, and they left "glorifying and praising God" (Luke 2:20, NIV). No great tasting food, no fancy decorations, no expensive gifts — but they had joy in abundance, because they had seen the Savior.

That's what we need for Christmas: to go and see Jesus. That is what makes the celebration: to see Him, to be in a relationship with Him. That is all that is truly required.

I made fudge last year. I followed the recipe, finished up the last batch, left it to cool and opened up the refrigerator to get something to drink. As I opened the door I was greeted by the butter I had bought to include in the fudge. I had forgotten to put it in. I wondered how it would be without it. It really wasn't all that bad. I still liked it and still gave some to others. They ate it and didn't seem to notice much difference. (Of course, they may not have expected much to begin with.)

It appears to me that the butter, while a helpful ingredient to fudge, is not an essential ingredient.

The world tells us many things are essential ingredients for a wonderful Christmas, but the truth is they are merely helpful. They may add a little flavor, a little sparkle or two. But Christmas can still "taste great" without those things.

Often we get so focused on those extra ingredients we forget the one which is essential: Jesus. Many have only the extra ingredients. The result is a Christmas with a lot of busyness, some excitement and some warm, fuzzy feelings; but not a truly joyful, satisfying celebration.

As last Christmas season began I was feeling a little down as I thought about some of the "extra ingredients" I wasn't going to be able to enjoy. I did have the chance to enjoy one of them,

however, as I attended a concert early in the Advent season. A simple song was shared about "Immanuel, our God is with us." God reminded me through those words what Christmas is all about. "They will call him Immanuel — which means 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23, NIV).

The world wants us to focus on what we don't have; and to then rush to the stores and try to buy it. This Christmas let's focus on what we have. God is with us. The "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6, NIV) has come to be with us. And since He is with us, what more do we need? What more could we ask for?

What is essential for a great Christmas celebration is present. May He be present in your life. And may you have a joyful Christmas!

— Pastor Craig Johnson

**"We'll never have all that is thought to be necessary for an ideal Christmas, if the world is our guide."**



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SOMETHING TO SHARE

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## Successful fishing?

**T**he opening evening of fishing season found me launching my boat at Collinwood Lake. As I was going out, a boat was coming in.

"Anything biting out there?" I asked.

"Yes," they replied, "We got seven walleyes and quite a few small northerns."

"Where," I asked.

They answered: "In 16 to 17 feet of water off the first point. We are coming in because we ran out of crawlers and our battery went dead on the trolling motor."

Well, it didn't take me long to get to the point and pull in next to some other boats. I figured I better anchor on the point in case things got crowded. I got my lines in the water for Joshua and myself, only to watch the boat next to me reel in quite a few walleyes and a large northern, while I caught only one, little northern!

As they were preparing to leave, I asked, "What am I doing wrong?"

"I don't know," they replied.

I asked, "Are you using slip bobbers to keep the bait just off the bottom?" To my disappointment, they said they were. My problem was that I didn't know how to rig up a slip bobber. My uncle had given me the little stops a year ago, but I hadn't taken time to figure out or ask

someone to show me how they worked. Now it was most likely the reason why I wasn't catching fish.

Do you have anyone next to you who is seeing people come to Jesus, but you aren't? Maybe it is time to humble yourself and ask what they are doing differently. It was a little embarrassing to admit that I didn't know how to use the slip bobber, but that is usually the beginning of how we learn something new. What we learn may make the difference between getting the bait to where the souls of men can better relate to it.

In our adult Sunday school class, we recently went through a great course called "Sharing Jesus Without Fear." I am excited to use this simple, non-threatening approach for finding if the Holy Spirit has been working in a person's life. Let me share the five questions that William Fay uses in sharing Christ:

1. Do you have any spiritual beliefs?
2. To you, who is Jesus?
3. Do you believe in a heaven or hell?
4. If you were to die, where do you think you would go?
5. If what you believed were not true, would you want to know?

If the person says "yes," then you have permission to give them your New Testament and ask them to read a few verses of what God

says, not what you say. If they say "no," then you just thank them for answering and go on your way. It is a simple way to get to the eternal questions. It gives you a place to start.

Have you been successful in your "soul fishing" lately? Do you have a hard time hearing of other churches where people are coming to Christ? Maybe it's time for you to humble yourself and begin taking the initiative to share Jesus with people.

William Fay says: "Success in witnessing is: Living out my Christian life, sharing the gospel, and trusting God for the results. Success is not bringing someone to Christ."

Don't put pressure on yourself that the Lord never intended for you to carry. Your responsibility is to witness; His is to save.



— *Pastor Lyndon Korhonen*  
*Good Shepherd Lutheran*  
*Cokato, Minnesota*