

The background image is a photograph of a winter scene. A snow-covered path leads from the foreground into the distance. On the right side of the path, there is a wooden fence with snow piled on its rails. In the background, there are snow-covered hills or mountains and some small buildings. The overall color palette is dominated by whites and blues, with some brown from the fence and trees.

The Lutheran AMBASSADOR

December 16, 1997

Let the light shine!

THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

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AN ENCOURAGING WORD

For I am not ashamed of the gospel ...

for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The righteous man shall live by his faith."
— Romans 1:16-17

What does it mean to live by faith? I have a plant on the desk in my office. If I remember my high school biology correctly, it lives by photosynthesis. It takes water and nutrients in by the roots. It takes energy from the sun in through the leaves. As a result it lives and grows. It must continue to do this all the time or it dies. The plant has no life in itself. If I withheld water and put it in the closet it would die.

The righteous person, the Christian, lives by faith. Faith is the process going on in the heart of the believer in which the truth of the gospel from the Scriptures, like water and nutrients from the soil, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, like the sun, makes us alive. It is an ongoing work that can never stop lest the Christian die. We have no power to live in ourselves. Without the Word and Spirit of God we would die. There would be no life.

Sometimes we think that faith is a quality to be possessed, or a gift to be received. While these may be somewhat true, faith is not simply something you have, it is the thing by which you live! I have many possessions I could quite easily live without, but faith is not one of them. Without faith there would be no life!

The Scriptures speak of at least three kinds of life for the believer besides our physical life. First there is spiritual or the life of fellowship with God that begins when we first believe in

Christ Jesus and are saved. This is our relationship or friendship with Him.

Very closely related to this is the "abundant life" which Jesus speaks about in John 10:10. This is the life of joy, peace, and holiness which the Christian experiences in an ever increasing degree as he becomes more Christlike in his daily life. We often call this life sanctification.

The third kind of life for the believer according to the Word is eternal life in heaven with God. This is the ultimate hope of our Christian experience.

All three of these are the result of faith. The righteous man shall live by his faith. None of them come from our own native abilities or religious works. They are the result of the working of God's Word and Spirit in our hearts.

Like the plant on my desk, no one sees the process taking place. It occurs in the hidden recesses of the heart. But its presence is unmistakable in that the Christian lives because of it. Praise be to Jesus. *He who has the Son has life, he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.* (I John 5:12).



— Pastor Steve Mundfrom
Bethany Lutheran
Sebek, Minnesota



Ready for Christmas?

"Ready for Christmas," she said with a sigh,
As she gave a last touch to the gifts piled high;
Then wearily sat for a moment and read
Till soon, very soon, she was nodding her head.
Then quickly spoke a voice in her dream,

"Ready for Christmas? What do you mean?
Ready for Christ, when only last week
You wouldn't acknowledge your friend on the street?
Ready for Christmas, while holding a grudge?
Perhaps you had better let God be the judge.
Why, how can the Christ-child come and abide.
In a heart that is selfish and filled with pride?
Ready for Christmas, when only today
A beggar lad came and you turned him away
Without even a smile to show that you cared!
The little he asked — it could have been spared.
Ready for Christmas,
 You've worked it is true,
But just doing the things that you wanted to do.
Ready for Christmas,
 Your circle's too small.
Why, you're not ready for Christmas at all!"

She awoke with a start, and a cry of despair,
"There's so little time, and I've still to prepare!
O Father, forgive me, I see what you mean,
To be ready means more than a house swept clean!"
Yes, more than the giving of gifts and a tree,
It's the heart swept clean that He wants to see,
A heart that is free from bitterness — sin,
Ready for Christmas — and ready for Him!

author unknown
—from the *West Lisbon Messenger*
Newark, Illinois
December, 1993





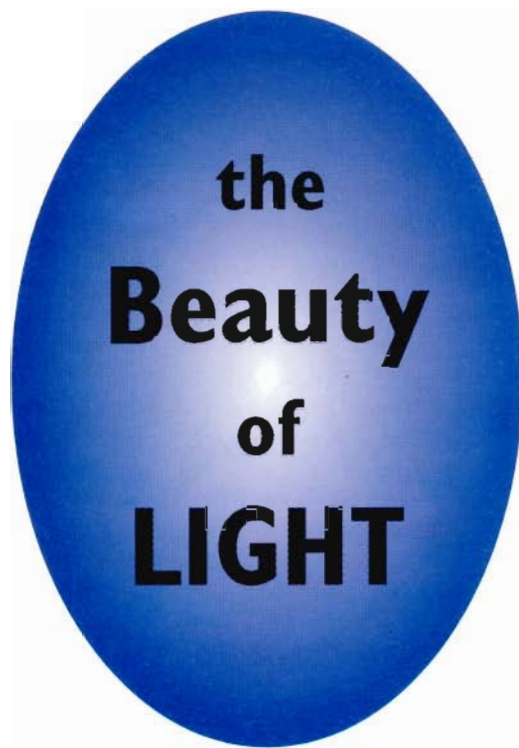
***Beautiful Savior!
King of creation!
Son of God and Son of Man!
Truly I'd love Thee,
Truly I'd serve Thee,
Light of my soul, my joy, my crown!***

***Fair are the meadows,
Fairer the woodlands,
Robed in flow'rs of blooming spring;
Jesus is fairer; Jesus is purer;
He makes our sorrowing spirit sing.***

***Fair is the sunshine,
Fairer the moonlight
And the sparkling stars on high;
Jesus shines brighter,
Jesus shines purer;
Than all the angels in the sky.***

***Beautiful Savior! Lord of the nations!
Son of God and Son of Man!
Glory and honor, Praise, adoration,
Now and for evermore be Thine!***

**— Munster Gesangbuch,
trans. Joseph A Seiss
Ambassador Hymnal #177**



In Washington State the peaks of the Cascade mountains can combine with gorgeous sunsets to create a beautiful scene. Growing up by a lake, I had the privilege of experiencing often what seemed like a bright red fire ball setting in the western sky right in the still waters of Nest Lake.

Now, my family and I reside in a northern Minnesota border town only 18 miles from Canada. Here we enjoy the spectacular "Northern Lights." There have been times when my wife, Lisa and I have risen out of bed and gone outside to watch them dance in the nighttime sky. Once on the way home we stopped the car on a lonely road, turned the head lights off and just watched the show for what seemed like an hour. The brilliant blues, violets, whites and greens flashed throughout the sky. What a sight to behold!



**— Pastor Alan Arneson
Badger Creek and Oiland
Lutheran Parish
Badger, Minnesota**

God surely has created an array of beauty that you and I can enjoy. He is the Giver of light. As sinners, we cannot and will not fully comprehend the magnitude of His splendor in this world. That only comes in eternity. It is only because of Him that we have the chance to enjoy such brilliance. James 1:17 says, *Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow.*

More importantly, God, through Jesus Christ, is the true Light. In John 8:12 Jesus says, *I am the light of the world; he who follows me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life.* What kind of light is Jesus speaking about? He is not referring to some spectacular scene, such as a sunset or a nighttime sky event. Jesus is speaking of something that does not fade away, but is permanent, everlasting and never disappears. Let's consider for a moment the following truths about light:



Light brings life

My wife was putting our boys to bed. They read a Bible story and sang the song "This Little Light of Mine." After the song my wife explained that when Jesus lives in our heart He is our light and we can shine His love to others. At that point our three-year-old, Kyle, decided he wanted to be sure Jesus was living in his heart and prayed a simple prayer. The Light brought life.

In Acts 9 we read of Saul on the road to Damascus attempting to receive permission from the high priest to imprison and persecute more people believing in Jesus. Instead of permission being granted, Saul was confronted on his way by a light from heaven. It was Jesus coming in the form of light that showed Saul his need of forgiveness and of the Savior. That light Saul came to embrace brought him to repentance and faith in Christ.



Light brings hope

Imagine the exuberance the wise men had when they saw the star (Matthew 2) in the east, this prophetic sign of the birthplace and birth of the Christ Child. It must have been the most beautiful star they had ever seen. This star brought great hope to their weary souls as they journeyed on by foot to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem to worship the newborn King.

As a young child I was afraid of the darkness in the walkout basement of the home I grew up in. My brother and I had our bedrooms downstairs. I never liked walking into the basement living room unless I could reach around from the stairway and turn on the light so that when I came into the room it would be already lit! As a young child having that light on when I immediately entered the room brought great comfort and hope that everything was fine.

Jesus gives us hope. When all seems dark in our lives He can lift us up. He alone can make the day bearable. Psalm 38:15 states, *For I hope in Thee, O Lord; Thou wilt answer, O Lord my God.* May that be your prayer and heartfelt desire.

Perhaps many of the Christmas decorations you have in your home are connected with light: the candles, the nativity scene and the Christmas tree. Light gives us beautiful things to enjoy. The True Light gives us an even greater gift to enjoy — the hope of eternal life in Christ. As the lights of the season illumine our homes may it remind us all the more of the real reason Christmas is to be celebrated — to celebrate the True Light that has come into the world to illumine our lives.

God sent His only begotten Son into this dark world to die for your sins and mine. He desires to shine within our hearts. When He does, that is truly something beautiful!





Fascinated with the LIGHT

— Ann Will Allred
Claremore,
Oklahoma

M

My son
Scott,
was
almost
four
months

old when he celebrated his first Christmas. Lying on a pastel blanket under a brightly decorated Scotch pine, he stared at its colorful beauty, fascinated by the light. The growing excitement in his face was reflected in his little body as he kicked and squirmed, arms waving while he babbled and blew bubbles through tightly pursed lips.

Occasionally he would stop all movement and quietly focus on one light immediately before him ... then simply smile. The beauty of that smile took my breath away.

When God chose to reveal Himself to us, He did not bowl us over with His majesty. He orchestrated His revelation in digestible segments so that we were able to take it all in. Following years of prophetic announcements, the event began with a child, His Son, lying in a manger under a starlit sky. True there were angels, and yes, the shepherds must have been amazed. But the angels did not remain. And when they left, there was one, simple star, shining in the midst of the night sky, symbolically announcing the salvation of our world.

Below lay Truth.

Below was the Way.

Below was Light. And this was a light that would shine in the darkness.

Christmas should remind us that God was, is, and always will be a realist. He created reality. And He is the only one who can truly make sense of it. Throughout Scripture, Christ is equated with light. But always the light is presented as that which would give perspective to the darkness. *In the world*

ye shall have tribulation, promised Christ, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world (John 16:33b). The darkness would not be removed. But a way through it could be known.

Total darkness will eventually blind a person. Too much light can also blind. Why? We are human and we are forced to live within the bounds of our fallen, physical and spiritual natures. Had I set Scott under a tree covered with thousands of watts of neon tubing, his reaction would have been much the same as the disciples who fell on their faces to shield themselves from God's voice, during the Transfiguration event. We were not created to stand such extremes. We were not given the means to fully understand.

But we were created to know Him and love Him. When Christ asked Peter, *But whom do you say that I am?* Peter's response, *Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God* (Matthew 16:15-16), was impulsive, yet sure. He had walked with the Light and was gradually beginning to understand ultimate Truth. There was a steadfastness about Christ that transcended the self-centered and self-serving nature of this world. Furthermore, He was teaching Peter and his fellow disciples that as they grew to know Him better, and to let Him indwell their lives, they too would become light to a fallen world.

It was a revolutionary thought. God Himself, touching man, through man. God revealing his light with a human torch. *In Him was life, and that life was the light of men* (John 1:4).

The simplicity of my baby boy, enthralled and enraptured with his "under the tree" perspective, is the same reaction God's heart desires of us as we look at Him through Christ. It is an awe-filled abandonment to praise, that no other person, place, or thing in this universe is worthy of receiving. Why are we fascinated with the Light? Because the Light illuminates whom we can trust; because it is our escape — our reprieve — our rest — our way of approaching a sovereign God by quietly looking into His face, and smiling. And I believe He is a Father who loves with such depth, that seeing such a smile must surely take His Holy breath away.



An authentic Christmas

An authentic Christmas display, created to resemble as closely as possible the original scene in Bethlehem, might seem quite strange to the modern observer. There would be no colored lights, no carolers singing, no tinsel trees, no brightly wrapped packages. Only a dirty stable and a newborn baby. It would hardly look or sound like Christmas at all.

Perhaps our idea of an authentic Christmas includes certain customs or favorite foods that we inseparably associate with the holiday. It might be when a candlelight service or a family gathering is scheduled, or whether we serve lutefisk or potatiskorv, fattigmand or appelskiver. If a certain something were missing, it would hardly seem like Christmas at all.

What is an authentic Christmas? There are two verses in the little Book of Titus that point us to the heart of the season's celebration: *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all* (2:11); *But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared* (3:4).

The Savior has appeared! Grace, salvation, kindness, love — not shining decorations or splendid feasts — are the true marks of an authentic Christmas.

My wish for you is a holiday season filled with more than traditionalism and materialism, one that is centered instead on the authentic assurance that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords appeared in the flesh for our salvation, providing His people both peace and joy to receive and to share.

Wishing you all a truly authentic Christmas,



— Pastor Robert L. Lee



Sharing the LIGHT with those in darkness

— Jim Larson, Director
Cup of Cold Water Ministries
Sheridan, Illinois

TThere are few things more thrilling than to watch the eyes of a new Christian glow with excitement as he or she tells about the difference Christ has made. There is a whole change in thinking. "It's just incredible!" I have heard them exclaim. They have experienced real love, and can't stop talking about it. Keith Green described it "Like waking up from the longest dream." They see themselves as having come out of a fog. They have come "out of darkness, and into His marvelous light" (II Peter 2:9).

It is a tremendous transformation! Ephesians 5:8 says, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." Not only do we experience the light, but we become it. Our changed lives reflect Jesus, the Light of the world, and "shine like stars in the universe," as we model the Word of Life in the midst of the evil darkness around us (Philippians 2:15).

What good, however, would a life that looked like Jesus be if no one could see it? In Jesus' famous words of Matthew 5:15, He reminds us that people do not light a lamp and then absurdly proceed to hide it. The purpose of a lamp is to eliminate darkness. Nevertheless, the constant challenge for Christians is to take
(continued on next page)

SHARING THE LIGHT

their light out to where it needs to be seen.

I expect most Christians would admit they have not personally shared the gospel in the past year. Most have never led anyone to Christ. Sometimes it is out of fear of rejection or of offending people. Many Christians, unfortunately, just do not know how. But very often it is simply because we fail to plan how to do it, forgetting how much fun it really is. We expect it will come up in the course of our interaction with non-believers, and sometimes it does, but we don't look to go out of our way. Often, however, we only

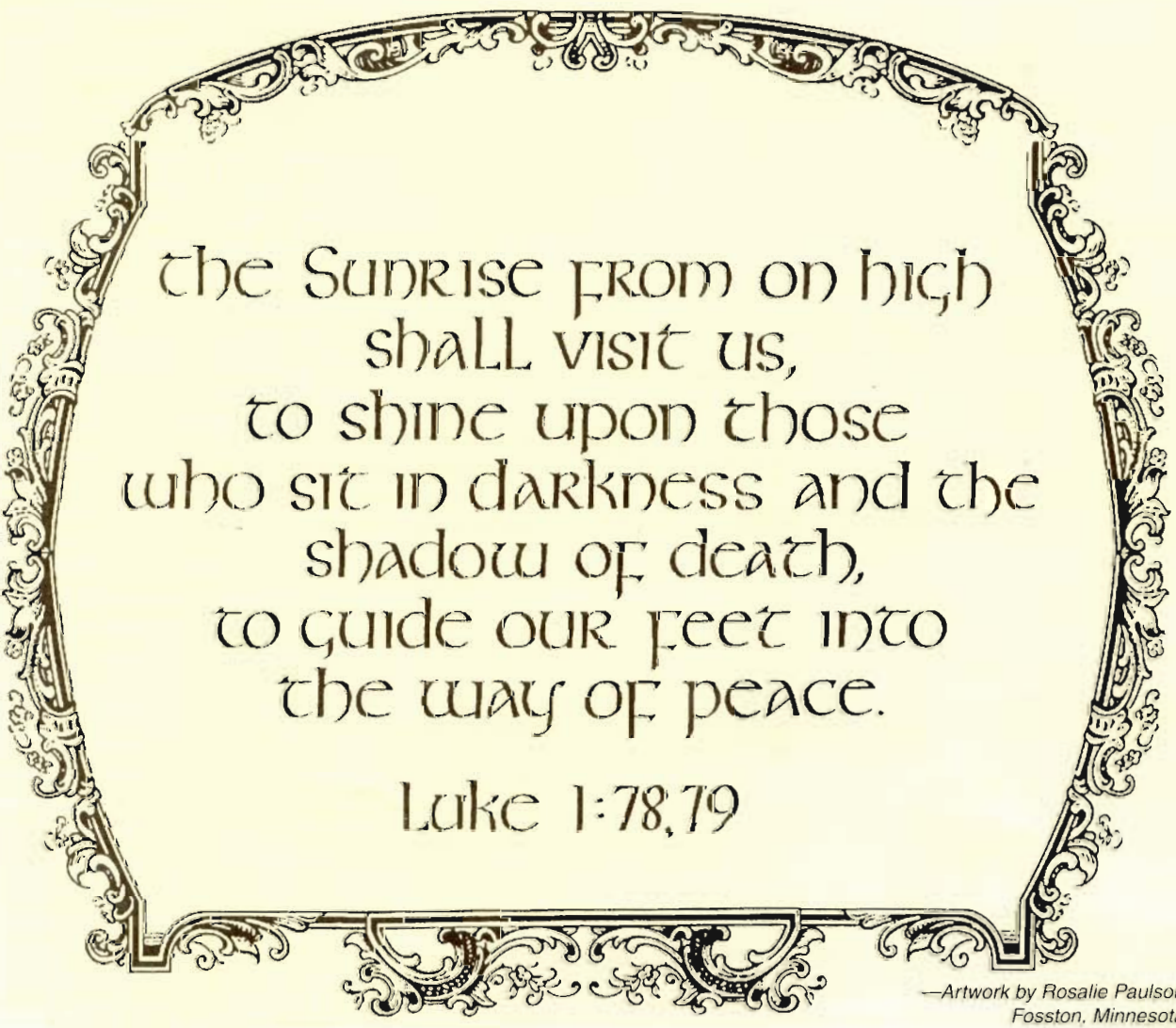
interact with a limited number of unbelievers, while vast numbers of people have no interaction with Christians as part of their daily lives. To them Christmas means nothing more than Santa Claus. Often we think of those yet unreached in other countries, but really they are all around us.

More and more Americans today have never been to church. Many are immigrants, others from unchurched homes. They would not know what to do if they were to attend a church service, even on Christmas Day. The song words, when to stand up or sit down are strange and confusing.

Many would not know what the offering is for. They would be fuzzy on the meaning of words like *atonement* and *grace*. Most have no idea where to find the book of Isaiah, and some would be surprised to hear that sex outside of marriage is wrong.

Furthermore, many people are terrified at the thought of entering a church door. They have a vastly distorted idea about Christianity. Many believe they are too bad for God. Often I have heard, "If I were to go to church, the roof would cave in!"

Since these kinds of folks are



the Sunrise from on high
shall visit us,
to shine upon those
who sit in darkness and the
shadow of death,
to guide our feet into
the way of peace.

Luke 1:78,79

—Artwork by Rosalie Paulson
Fosston, Minnesota

unlikely to be reached by our normal routines, we need to be constantly looking for ways to reach them.

Sometimes, it might mean doing special outreaches like twelve-step groups, Mother's day out, evangelistic home Bible studies, etc.

At the same time, we need to grow in our awareness of unreached people groups in other areas, and begin praying for God to use us to reach at least one of them. This includes not only ethnic groups in other countries, but groups right here in America.

I do not remember this, but my

"Often we think of those yet unreached in other countries, but really they are all around us."

mother tells me that when I gave one of my first "sermons" as a young kid, I spoke on the Great Commission. I said, "It says, 'Go!' And 'Go' means 'Go!'" Perhaps that is not a bad thought. If we will only go and let His light shine, God will inevitably use us.

You, just as much as any believer, have a great light. You are light. Consider making a plan to go and let it shine. Ask God to show you where He wants you to go outside of your normal routine and place of comfort.

Let Him put you in a place where you can see the light of Christ at work. Whether it is to prostitutes or farmers, addicts or businessmen, gang members or single mothers, refugees or mentally handicapped, anyone who steps out to share Jesus with people who don't know Him is in for a lot of fun.



Ann is celebrating a new holiday this season. Her family has always had the tradi-

tional candy canes, family gatherings, holiday music, decorations and, of course, the long list of coveted presents. Her family celebrates Christmas just like most of her friends, but this year is different.

This year Ann went to a youth

rally with one of her friends and met Jesus. It wasn't as if she had never heard about Jesus before, it was just that she had only heard about Him. No one had ever introduced Him to her.

It was a dramatic experience at first. She wanted everyone at home to meet Him too. The excitement had cooled since that first day. Sometimes she wondered if He was really there. Now with the holiday season approaching, Jesus made a subtle difference that she hadn't noticed before; a difference that caused her to celebrate a new holiday this season.

It wasn't just Christmas that

was coming around again. This year CHRISTmas was coming.

Her family still had candy canes, but now they reminded her of the "J" in Jesus, the shepherd's staff, and the blood that flowed on the cross for her sins.

Holiday music filled the house again, but this year the songs about Jesus were not just background music, they were messages from heaven.

When they decorated, she asked if she could put the angel on the top of the tree and found a nativity set for her room.

There were the usual lists of presents, but this year it was about giving rather than getting.

They still had family gatherings, but this year she had the opportunity to tell them about her first CHRISTmas.



— Pastor Kevin Olson
Youth Ministries Director

Celebrating the LIGHT

A special Christmas gift delivered by God to Mexico

T Twenty-five years ago the mountain village of Huitzilán didn't have electric lights. Newlyweds Rebeca and Antonio had hoped to arrive in good time before darkness fell. But they had to walk the last several miles on a rough path that led them up one side of the mountain and down the other. So it was late at night when they arrived in this coffee-growing village, the place of Antonio's birth and where his family lived — where Antonio had first heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and had given his heart to the Lord. Later the first Lutheran church in the state of Puebla would be established in this village.

Over the years since that night the Lord has used this man and woman to spread the good news in the surrounding area. Antonio's radio broadcast in the Nautal language announced the story of salvation and was the means of bringing many to Christ.

Our Christmas Eve of 1996 was spent in this village. I'd like to tell you about it. It was a special Christmas gift from God.

The "empty nest syndrome" had hit me hard when we came to Mexico; with a different twist. We as parents had left our children, all adults now, responding to God's call to return to mission service.

Our weekly schedule was to pack up our Chevy S10, usually on Friday morning, taking along some coffee and rolls to enjoy once we got out of the city. About that time the radio stations faded away and we'd put in a music cassette. One week in November, I selected some Christmas tapes, thinking it was time to enjoy them. But halfway through the first one, I found tears coming, my heart longing for family. "Silent night, Holy night" can do that to one away from home!

So I changed the tape to something else and silently prayed that God would fill my heart with longing for Him and fill my experience with joy in serving, in being His child, in obeying His call, for being here in Mexico with His children.

The Holy Spirit led me to think of God's heart on the eve of Jesus' birth — the great excitement of having His plan of salvation now unfolding in a moment. That moment would change the whole of mankind, bringing spiritual light into the world — Jesus, the Savior.

And so our weekly trips continued. I became aware

of the plans taking shape for the coming celebration of Christmas. The church buildings were being readied, the children and youth were having their practices. It was harder to find time on the weekends for the classes because of needing time to get everything done.

On the 24th we left our home in the city with plenty of time to arrive in Huitzilán for the 9 p.m. Christmas Eve service. It had been raining the days before so the mountains were covered with new snow, the sky was clear and blue. Our hearts were filled with the Christmas carols being sung on the cassette. Yes, my heart was ready to receive them, and to sing along!

Walking into the church I was thrilled to see the beautiful decorations — long evergreen needles woven into garlands and intertwined with red and white flowers fresh from the gardens. The air was filled with a pungent fragrance from the lovely decorations. The church building holds about two hundred people and all of the benches were full plus

many sitting on the floor, the women spreading their shawls for themselves and their children; young men and boys were standing in the back. There were those who were outside, perhaps curious, or, those who were not yet committed Christians, but who wanted to hear more.

One could sense the Spirit of the occasion! He was there in the bright eyes of the children as they recited their poems. He was in the group singing, one wonderful hymn after another. He was in the faces of the young men and boys as they sang and played their guitars. And, of course, He was in the reading of His very own Word!

Oh yes, the Light of the world was present! It was His celebration. I knew that God's heart was rejoicing, even as it had that long ago night of the Babe's birth.

It was 1 a.m. when the service finished, but no one was ready to go home to their beds. To end the night the women had prepared hundreds of tamales which were served with sweet coffee and atole (a milk-based drink made with rice, corn, chocolate, oatmeal, or strawberry flavor). The Spirit was in the serving, too, as in the sharing. The Spirit was in the hospitality shown to us as we were led to our bed with full stomachs and happy hearts.

As the lights of the house were turned off, I said a



— Clara Gunderson
Puebla, Mexico

prayer of thanks for the gift of celebration given to me, as well as the strength of the witness of this church in this village.

About a 45 minute drive from Huitzilan is the village of Huahuaxtla. For me this place is where the fog and mist like to gather. It is at a higher altitude, more closed in by the mountains. But the light of Jesus is there also! Concha and Evaristo had moved with their large family from Huitzilan to Huahuaxtla and Pastor Antonio began visiting them. In time the result was a Lutheran church in this village also!

This was our destination on Christmas morning. We were to join the believers in their partially finished church for their celebration of Jesus' birth. Again as we entered we didn't notice the unfinished sanctuary but rather the thick layer of pine needles placed on the floor and the lovely garlands above our heads. Although those participating in

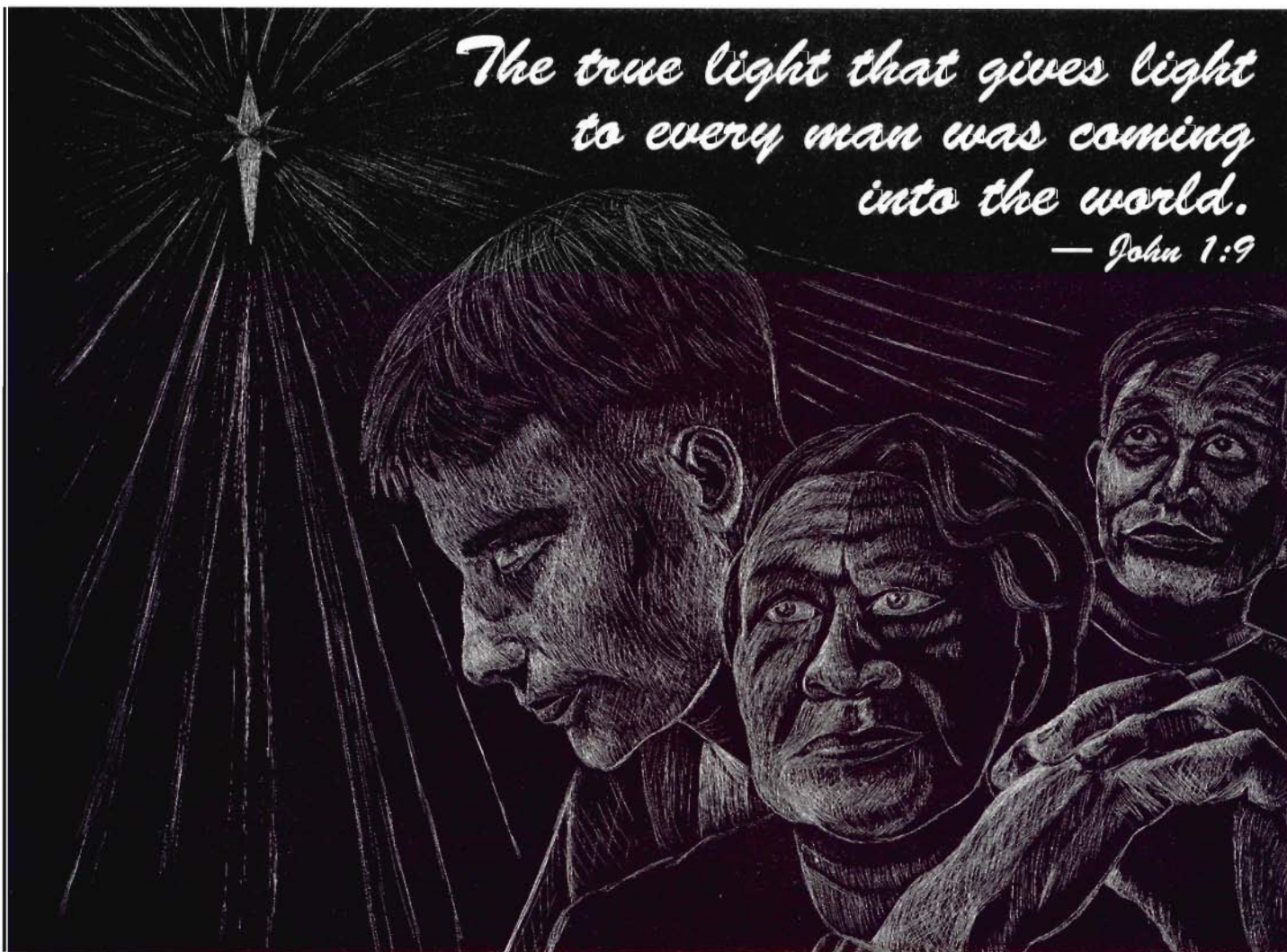
the service had different faces, the blessing was equal to that of the night before. The joy given by the Spirit of the Lord in celebration of His birth gripped my heart here also.

Now it is a year later and in this village of Huitzilan we have recently joined in the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the church. I was told there are about 500 people in the town and about half of them are evangelicals. What a witness of the power of the gospel in the preaching of God's Word and in the lives of the believers! This anniversary festival was also a celebration of the light of Jesus and an acknowledgment of the faithfulness of Rebeca and Antonio in letting their lights shine where God called them. I am thankful for the gift of celebrating Jesus, the Light of the world.



*The true light that gives light
to every man was coming
into the world.*

— John 1:9



— Artwork by Jennifer Slider, Oceanside, California.

(This poem was included in a collection of poetry, "The Jew," published in 1842 in Norway. The author is the son of a Norwegian Lutheran pastor who was a member of the constitutional assembly which declared Norway's independence in 1814. In 1841, the author issued a pamphlet appealing for

the end of discriminations against Jews. He explained the advantages the Danes and Swedes were enjoying because they had already granted emancipation to Jews. Along with that pamphlet, this poem was instrumental in changing the attitude of the Norwegian people toward the Jews.)

The Eve of Christmas

— by Henrik Arnold Wergeland
translated by I. Grondahl

In such a storm — it was the Eve of
Christmas —
When the tall night overtook the
lingering day —
Through Sweden's wildest forest, an old Jew,
Both worn and weary was trudging onward.
As the Christmas holiday approached
he was longingly
Awaited in Norway's countryside;
His knapsack was filled with brooches, ribbons and
What else the maidens wanted for the
days of Christmas
And the New Year.
Their longing knew suspense, but never fear:
For never had Old Jacob disappointed
Them any Christmas yet: he came as sure
As Christmas Eve itself.

In such a night! In such a storm! Hush!
Was it not a cry?
Or, was it the tempest howling through the
branches of the trees?
Ah, there again a cry is heard and straightway
Old Jacob stops,
And with straining ear listens once again.
He hears no more. For now the storm increases,
Thundering like a cataract over a drowning man.
He presses on; but, "Hush! Once more
a cry is heard!"
A sound that rose above the forest's roaring.
"That wily owl cries just like a little child.
Who would let go a child in such a storm so wild?
In it not a she-wolf would permit her young
to roam."

Again the old man wearily through the
snowdrift totters onward.
Again he hears a cry, and he can doubt no more:
This stormy whirlwind that o'er the forest blew
And piled the snowdrifts higher than
a winding snow-tower,
Has borne a word, one single word, along.
At once he turns to whence he heard it come,

Working his way deeper into the forest,
Deeper into the snow, into the night,
Which like a mountain-wall against his steps
had risen,
And as if the whole white forest were one horde
Of flying, whirling spirits, who rose to stay
his progress.

Still the old man fights on against the tempest,
And when it ceases, as if to catch its breath,
he listens on his knees.
Again he rises, penetrates the darkness
and the storm.
No more he hears. The old Jew trembles,
To think himself pursued by evil spirits,
And stammers forth the ancient prayers he knows.
Then it whines again, and this time quite near.
His own reply against the storm is carried back into
his mouth. Again he halts. Ten paces more! There
something dark is moving
Upon the snow, as if the storm were jostling
With some loose stump broken at the root.

"An arm! Great God! 'Tis a child, a child!
— but dead!"
Ah! Did the stars of heaven this night surmise,
When Bethlehem's Star among them shone,
That no good on earth could e'er be done
For none of them saw this precious sight.
Old Jacob as glad as though he a treasure found,
Threw down at once his riches all, the knapsack;
Pulled off his narrow coat carefully wrapping it
About the lost child's limbs; then bared his bosom.
He laid her cold, cold icy cheek up to his breast
Until she awoke to hear his beating heart.
Then up he sprang. But whither now?
The storm had covered up his track. What did he care?
For in the thundering of the forest treetops
He heard the harps of David jubilant.
The stormy gusts seemed to him lofty cherubs,
Who, borne on snow white wings, pointed the path;
And on his random, winding way he felt
The gentle but strong urge of the Lord's own hand.

But how to find a house in the wildwood,
 In such a night, when lights durst not be burnt?
 Halfway across there was a lonely cottage,
 Whose roof mid snowbanks high could not be seen,
 Nor its black wall distinguished from the bare rock.
 As by a miracle before this house he stops.
 There, utterly exhausted, he sank down;
 Some time did pass before he with his burden
 Was able to approach the humble entrance.
 He gave a gentle knock — the child was sleeping.
 Then he discovered he had lost his knapsack,
 And realized he had nothing now to offer
 The good poor people who would run to open
 Their door with hospitable haste. Alas,
 Full many a time he knocked, ere came the answer:
 "In our Lord's name who comes in such a night?"
 "It is Old Jacob. Don't you recognize me? The old Jew."
 "A Jew!" terror-stricken they shouted
 Both a man's and a woman's voice.
 "You cannot enter! For not a coin we have
 with which to buy,
 And to our house you only bring misfortune,
 Who killed the One, whose birth tonight we celebrate —"
 "Did I?" "Yea, your people — and so this is a sin
 Through a thousand generations to be punished."
 "Alas! Tonight, when even dogs come in! Yes, dogs.
 But not a Jew shall enter in a Christian house."

Old Jacob heard no more. The cruel, cruel words
 Cut through him keener than the winter wind,
 And, stronger than the wind; they threw him down,
 Down in the snow, bent over the slumbering child.
 Then, as toward the lighted window he did turn
 His gaze expecting that the white face might
 Appear again — it seemed as though into
 a bed of down
 He sank, and that a soothing warmth flowed through
 His veins, while familiar whisperings
 he seemed to hear,
 Like summer breezes softly playing on a grassy harp
 Around his snowy bed till one appeared
 With lifted finger, saying: "Come! He sleeps!"
 And in a bright-illuminated hall nearby
 They disappeared; only the child remained,
 Drawing the pillows ever closer
 round about his frame,
 Until it seemed to him he fell asleep.
 The snow was softly burying the dead.

"O Jesus! There the Jew is sitting still!"
 Exclaimed the man, as he looked out in the morning.
 "Then chase him off! For this is Christmas Day,"
 Chimed in his wife. "Look at the greedy Jew,
 How hard he draws his bundle to his breast!
 Importunate as ever to sell his goods!
 His staring eyes are fixed on us as if

He still did hope that we his goods would buy.
 Yet I would not mind seeing what he has to offer."
 "All right, Jew, let us see!"

The man and wife came near.
 They saw the frozen gleam in the dead eyes.
 More pale grew they than he, they cried in fear
 And trembled with remorse. "O Lord! O Lord!
 What a misfortune this!" They raised him gently;
 His bundle followed too; loosened next his coat;
 There hung, with arms locked round
 the old Jew's neck,
 Margrethe, their own child, a corpse like him.
 No thunderbolt, no deadly sting of viper,
 Could fill them more with awful fear and pain,
 The snow was not so white as was the father.
 The storm did not wail louder than the mother.
 "Oh, God has punished us! 'Twas not the storm,
 But our own cruelty, that killed our child!
 In vain, alas, as on our door Old Jacob knocked,
 We at the door of mercy too shall knock in vain."

And when after the storm the forest road again
 was open,
 A man came from the farm
 where Margrethe long had lived
 He told how little Grethe off had started
 Before the storm arose, to reach her home
 On Christmas Eve to visit with her parents.
 He did not come to ask about the child,
 But for the Jew, from all the village girls
 who were sadly disappointed,
 Their only hope was now to be at worship
 In church on New Year's Day — that is,
 if he were found.

There lay the Jew, stretched a corpse before the
 glowing hearth.
 His host, with gaze as frozen as the Jew's,
 His body bent and rigid like the corpse,
 Sat staring stiffly into the glowing embers,
 And ever stirring, nourishing the fire,
 He tried to warm the stiff and frozen body,
 To get it straightened out and the hands folded.
 In front of them Margrethe's mother knelt,
 Folding the stiff arms of her little one
 Tighter and tighter round the dead man's neck.
 "She does no more belong to us," she sobbed,
 "For by his death he purchased has our child.
 We dare not now take little Grethe from him;
 With our Lord Jesus in heaven she must plead
 That He for us would intercession make."
 To God His Father the poor Jew will complain.



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I was looking up into the night sky and saw the bright beams of one of those giant spotlights swirling, turning, and circling through the darkness. It seemed to be shouting to me, "Come! See what wonderful thing is here! It's new and exciting — you have to see it! Follow me, my beams of light will guide you." I listened to those spotlights and followed their beams, only to be disappointed at what they were advertising: a new gas station with not-so-great prices, a "great deal" on a car I will never be able to afford and the grand opening of a video store giving a free bag of popcorn with the rental of ten movies. The events these lights proclaimed were not that appealing.

A light to

How different it must have been to find the event the star of Bethlehem was proclaiming!

In Matthew 2:1-12 we find the only account of that guiding star. The magi had seen the star appear in the sky, and unlike my experiences with the spotlights, they knew exactly what event the star was guiding them to. In verse two they ask, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." This light was a definite sign to them that a Child had been born who was to be King of the Jews.



Hope

Several weeks ago the light of Christmas began to shine in our house. It was Saturday night and our children were busy gathering presents to put into shoe boxes.

Each one had to be just right. One package was for an infant girl. Another would go to a toddler boy. Still another was prepared for a girl old enough to be in elementary school. The final box would be for a boy nearing his teens. Our four children had never prepared presents like this before. Each gift that went into the boxes was lovingly chosen for boys and girls that our children will probably never meet in this life.

These four boxes will travel around the world and end up in places like Ghana, Serbia, Azbania and Vietnam. Children will open them and receive gifts given in honor of Jesus Christ — gifts intended to bring light into their eyes on Christmas Day.

But there is more.

Into each decorated box a message of hope will be placed. These pamphlets will speak in the language of each child about the hope that Jesus brings. These children will learn that forgiveness of sins is available. They will be invited to receive

guide us along the way

These wise men knew this event was much bigger than a new watering hole for their camels! But I wonder if they knew who the Child really was. Did they know He was the Son of God? Did they know the light of the star had guided them to the Light of the world?

As believers today, we have the most perfect light to guide us: Jesus. He says in John 8:12, *I am the light of the world, he who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.* What an incredible promise to cling to as we look to the Light to guide us each day.

Not only did the star proclaim the birth of Christ to the wise men, it also

guided them directly to Him, *And lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was.* How amazing it must have been to look into the sky and follow that light! Wherever it guided, they followed, until the star stopped right over the place where Jesus was. When our Light guides us, do we follow? When Jesus is guiding us in a direction He wants us to go, do we obey? Maybe we don't even look to see in which direction He is leading us. Our Light is always here, ready to show us where to go, who
(continued on next page)

— Erika Brandt
Abiding Savior Lutheran
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

that shines

the greatest Gift ever given. My children have prayed that the true Light of Christmas will shine in four new hearts this year. That is their hope.

Two millennia ago an elderly man named Simeon was waiting in hope. He had one prayer — he wanted to see Jesus face to face. God's greatest gift to the world was given that first Christmas. Shortly after his birth Jesus was brought to the temple and there was Simeon. Scripture says that "Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:28-32). What a day this was! Simeon's hope saw its fulfillment.

On that same occasion a very old widow met the baby Jesus. Hope had guided Anna's daily routine of worship, fasting and prayer. At the very moment Simeon was with Jesus, Anna came alongside and "gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). Again a message of hope as the light of Christmas was

shining.

Does the hope of Christmas still shine in your heart? Is Jesus "the reason for the season" in your home? As presents are chosen and given in honor of Jesus' birthday, is He still the guest of honor? Is there a new way God would like to use you to bring the message of hope to others this Christmas?

I was humbled by the joy I saw in my children's faces as they prepared those shoe boxes. I was humbled the next morning as many other brightly decorated shoe boxes were now gathered at the front of our sanctuary. The children of our church were invited to lay their little hands on the boxes. We prayed God would bring hope and blessing through these gifts. He will.

I am further humbled as I witness the hope of Simeon and Anna. They were so quick to receive God's greatest Gift. They were so eager to see many others find their hope fulfilled in Jesus Christ. They knew this was a gift for young and old, the world over.

Does the hope of Christmas still shine in your heart?



— Pastor Mark Olson
Calvary Free Lutheran
Arlington, South Dakota



to minister to, how to be more like Him. All we have to do is simply look to Him and follow.

The wise men had been on quite a journey since they first saw this star. We can only imagine how they must have felt along the way; tired yet eagerly anticipating what was waiting for them. But we know how they felt when they knew they were at their destination. Matthew 2:10-11 tells us, *And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And ... they fell down and worshipped Him.* The most intense gladness was felt, and they immediately fulfilled the purpose of their journey: worship.

The journey of a believer is never easy. We tire along the way just as the wise men must have. Like them, we also eagerly anticipate the end of our earthly voyage — that light of life promised in John 8, everlasting life. Jesus our Light is guiding us through every step of our life's trip. and one day soon, He will stop, and we will be there! What intense gladness will be ours! We will rejoice *with exceeding great joy* just as the wise men did. For the same King of the Jews they came to worship is the King of all who we will see in the air. And the purpose of our journey will be fulfilled in an eternity of worship and praise!



A time of joy

— Arlene Christensen
Bethel Lutheran
Elbow, Saskatchewan

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The shepherds were going about their usual routine — another night for them out in the field watching their sheep. They knew nothing of an event unfolding in the little town not far away; an event that would change their lives forever and in which they would participate.

Then suddenly a fearful thing happened. An angel appeared and the heavens broke forth with the light of the glory of God. The angel announced with joy that a Savior had been born. The multitude of the heavenly host sang, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.*

Before the birth of Christ the people sat in darkness, looking for the Messiah foretold in Isaiah 7:14, *Behold a virgin will be with child and bear a son and she shall call His name Immanuel (God with us).* The prophecy was fulfilled. The waiting was over. The shepherds knew of the prophecy and received the message with faith. They hurriedly left for Bethlehem to see this joyous happening.

Christmas is a time of joy. We are filled anew with a sense of awe and wonder as we again watch the events unfold, beginning with the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the innkeeper, the humble birth of the baby Jesus, culminating with the worship of the shepherds at the manger and their proclama-

tion to all of what they had just seen and heard.

There are many joys of this special season. Beyond the traditions and family gatherings is the greater joy of sins forgiven, of belonging to the family of God, the fellowship of believers, and walking with a God who is always there for us in the perplexities and sorrows that come our way.

We still live in a world of sin. Because of this, the joys of Christmas become tainted with sadness. To some there will be someone missing this year. Many lack the necessities of life. There are the empty lives of those who have not heard the joyful song of the angels and those who hear but reject the good news.

We have been privileged to hear this message over and over again. Can we stop and think for a moment what this experience was like for the shepherds? Imagine being



artwork by Teresa Fehrenbach, Montgomery, Illinois.

there that starlit night. Hear the angel say,

*Do not be afraid;
I bring you good news of great joy
which shall be for all people:
for today in the city of David
there has been born for you a Savior,
who is Christ the Lord.*

— Luke 2:10-11

It was not just another night. The Light had come and because of that it was, and is, a time of joy!



Changing the way we look at Christmas

Seeing it as a time for sharing

— Wade Mobley
Minneapolis, Minnesota



In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. — John 1:4-5

If there is ever a time that the truth of this Scripture is evident, it is during the Christmas season. Just thinking about Christmas can often produce mental pictures of one-hour waits in checkout stands, hectic family gatherings, and oft-disputed vacation time at work. Mental health counselors find a sharp rise in their case loads as depression and loneliness grips more individuals.

"How can the world be so blind?" With each passing Christmas, the question rings louder in my mind. Ever since becoming a Christian in 1991, Christmas has taken on a whole new meaning in my life. While I still rejoice in getting together with family and partaking of beloved Christmas traditions, I am now blessed by the heavenly reminder that Jesus Christ, God's own Son, born of the virgin Mary, came to earth to live a perfect life, die on the cruel cross of Calvary, and rise again to conquer sin and Satan. This gives a depth and love to Christmas that once did not reside within my heart.

We miss the point so often. It is an annual struggle to keep Christ first in Christmas. Temptation to cheapen and commercialize Christmas lies around the corner with the next store display or television commercial.

The answer to our dilemma lies in changing the way we look at Christmas. Christmas will always be a wonderful celebration of Christ's birth, and a marvelous reminder of His finished work upon the cross. However, we must begin to look at Christmas as another God-given opportunity to share with others their need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

And the Lord's bondservant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. - II Timothy 2:24-

26

The world around us is spiritually blind, having had their hearts darkened by unbelief (Romans 1:21). It is because of this that Christmas can be the most depressing time of year for an unbeliever. They have not the knowledge of the truth, and are held captive by Satan. People need the Lord. They always have, and they always will.

I had the opportunity recently to watch three friends in a performance of the musical *Showboat*. The Lord showed me several things from the experience. Foremost in my mind is the song of Joe, a slave on a turn-of-the-century riverboat, entitled *Old Man River*. The famous chorus ran throughout the production:

I get weary, and sick of trying.

I'm tired of living, and scared of dying.

Joe's song captured the life of every character on the stage in a tragic nutshell. They had no joy. They had no purpose. And in the end, they had no hope. They were tired of living and scared of dying.

The song was a slave song as those who sang it longed for freedom that seemed unattainable. The song could be sung by so many millions of people today, who long for freedom from their sin, but have no hope of obtaining such a glorious standing. The world around us is sick with sin, and it is our *ministry of reconciliation* (II Corinthians 5:20) to spread the Word of God to our little corner of the world. If we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ He has caused us to be born again to a living hope (I Peter 1:3). We have been saved from our sin for the purpose of declaring God's excellencies, for He has called us out of darkness into His wonderful light (I Peter 2:9).

If you cannot cross the oceans, and the heathen land explore,

You can find the heathen nearer, you can help him at our door.

The hymn writer Daniel March knew the importance of reaching out to our little corner of the world. Let us take seriously his challenge this Christmas season, and spread the light of Jesus across our darkened world and at our door.





Two very special Christmases

— by Alfred Hagnor
from *Evangelisten*
translated
from Norwegian by
Pastor Raynard Huglen
Newfolden, Minnesota

Mother had had many hard years. She had lost her husband after six years of happy marriage and was left alone with three young children. By dint of daily drudgery in washing, ironing, but mostly by sewing, she managed to avoid going to the county for help. Her health had been good, but now she was worn out and tired. The silver-gray hair and thin face witnessed of overwork and many hard times in life's struggle.

Both of her young daughters had office jobs at the factory where their father had worked and the son, Olav, was soon ready with his training to be a carpenter. The children were good and provided everything needed to keep the home in good shape.

Mother, who through the years had gone to church, became restless in hearing the new pastor.

"Is there something wrong with my salvation?" she asked herself every time she went home from church. "It has never been this way before. What can this mean? In hearing the old pastor one could be reassured, but this gets worse each time. Either something is wrong with me or else the new pastor is wrong."

She became very offended and pondered whether she should stay home on the Sundays he preached. Olav had bought a radio and she could listen to the worship service on that. But she couldn't get peace by stay-

ing home either, even if she always felt condemned when she went to church.

By the fall she was completely upset and toward Christmas time she had to go to the pastor's study to talk with him about her salvation. She was surprised at how friendly he was and that he understood her so well. There was no problem in talking in confidence with him, and she only felt sorry she hadn't confided in him before. And so, near Christmas, everything became clear for her, and assurance of being a child of God gripped her very heart.

Christmas Eve came and for the first time Mother read the Christmas story at the supper table.

"Now I must tell you something, my dear children. I have worked for you the best I could through all the years, but have neglected that which is most important. You must forgive me that I have been unable to lead you to Jesus.

"This year Mother has received the greatest Christmas gift and now I don't have any greater desire than that you also, my dear ones, would be saved."

She wanted to try to pray, but it was quiet for a while because she only cried, but then, "Oh thank You, heavenly Father, for this greatest of gifts. Oh thank You, Jesus, that You are mine."

Anna stood up and went to Mother and hugged her tenderly. "But Mother! What has come over you just now? You aren't sick, are you? You are always kind and good."

"Oh no, my friend, I have been unsaved all these years and have only now experienced what it is to be certain of my salvation. If I had only understood this before, then I could have led you in the right ways."

"I think you have become fanatical, Mother. Really, I have heard that you have shamed both yourself and us since you began to run to those prayer meetings down at the prayer chapel, but I never thought it had gone so far." Inga was offended as she looked at Mother, as she folded the napkin and placed it in the ring. "None of us have gone astray and so we aren't heathens." She raised herself, temper flaring, and went quickly into the living room.

Mother followed slowly and sat beside her on the sofa. "You mustn't take it this way, my child. It wasn't Mother's intention to offend you, but I had to say this."

"Well then, now we have heard that and it is to be hoped we don't have to hear any more about it in the future." Inga soon came to herself again and was sorry she had reacted as she did.

They enjoyed the evening together and all three went with Mother to church Christmas Day.

Autumn came again with its many festivals and meetings. The now older mother was glad every time she could get one of her children along to hear God's Word, but as a rule she had to avail herself of such opportunities alone.

In the last month of the year the community had a visit from a preacher who was well received by the people. The prayer chapel was filled to capacity night after night, and Mother got her children along to several meetings.

There was the spirit of revival in the air and some people sought the Lord. At one meeting a quiet but powerful spirit descended upon the gathering. When the last song was sung, the preacher spoke again: "We will sing one more song and those who wish to or have to leave the service may do so. The rest of us will remain for a prayer meeting. To be sure there are also longing souls tonight and you must stay in order to seek the Lord."

Olav and Anna were among those who went out from the meeting, but Inga remained at her mother's side. When the

believers knelt in prayer, Inga threw herself on her knees beside Mother and prayed for salvation.

"Thank You, thank You, dear Jesus," Mother said with tears. "I have prayed to You about this for a whole year now, but I hadn't dared hope that You would answer my prayer so soon. But You know, Lord, that I have more who need to be saved. Thank You for Inga, but, Jesus save Anna, too."

Suddenly the door opened and Anna came running down the aisle and threw herself down at Mother's side. "Oh, you must pray for me, Mother!"

Holding a daughter with each hand, she praised God. "Thank You, dear Lord Jesus; this is so much more than I have deserved, and You must save them both. However, that is something I don't have to beg of You; I know that You will save, Lord. But,

dear God, You know I still have one more who yet resists You. Thank You for these young girls of mine, dear Savior, but now it is my boy I am concerned about. You must be tired of me, but save my boy."

One of her friends felt he should go outside to see what had become of Olav, and found him standing by the wall crying. "You must come in with us again."

The man took Olav's hand and he came along willingly. He came leading the boy, who knelt weeping at the bench just in front of Mother.

"You must pray for me, Mother!" he said, catching his breath, and putting his arm around her neck. "I am so bad and have resisted God's call so long. There is certainly no salvation for me."

Mother found it hard to utter any words, but only wept for joy. Soon she became more composed and praised God for His great grace. The intense emotion which pervaded the gathering came out in a weak sigh.

Once again it was Christmas Eve and the family was gathered for the evening meal. This time Olav read the Christmas story. Mother broke out in praise to the Lord. "Thank You, thank You, good Lord, for all the grace You have shown to me all my life and not least since last Christmas. Thank You for Your unspeakable Gift and that I and mine have come to have a part in it."

"Mother found it hard to utter any words, but only wept for joy."



In the stillness of the falling snow, the Blue Jay who spent the winter was eating from the bird feeder undisturbed. From my window I enjoyed the quietness of the season. This scene brought back memories of Christmas from my childhood.

Christmas was fast approaching and in our rural school we were practicing for our annual Christmas program. My cousin and I, both six years old, were to sing a duet, "Lullaby," and cradle a doll in our arms. I remember standing there holding a "make-believe doll" while my cousin held her new doll. Tomorrow afternoon was the program.

I hurried home full of anticipation and eagerly expecting my new doll. My parents, always so loving and caring, seemed to ignore my anxiety. Everyone, including my four sisters, never mentioned a doll, although they must have

I remember when

— by Lydia McCarlson
Tabor Lutheran
Webster, South Dakota

sensed my disappointment.

Mother had cooked her usual good meal for supper and we were all sitting at the table. I sat there picking at my food.

Dad said, "Lydia, are you sick?"

The tears poured and I blurted out, "I haven't any doll for tomorrow." I didn't see Dad wink at Mom, but he suddenly said, "Didn't someone come into the hall?"

I heard the door open.

"Lydia, go and look."

I went and there was no one there but a package. I opened it. There was the most beautiful china doll with real hair and eyes that opened and shut. Smiling through my tears I hugged my

dad and mother. My sisters laughed as they all had shared the secret.

You see the grocer had a deal: if you purchased so many dollars in his store you could receive a doll. Dad had been saving up points and today he had been in town, seven miles away, with horses and sleigh, to get the doll and other necessities. Needless to say, it was a happy family who attended the school program the next afternoon.

Christmas was the time where the center attraction was the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child. There were no commercial ads in the papers.



In our Norwegian family the main paper was *Dackor Posten*, *Folkabladet*, and some farm papers. The true meaning in those days as I remember was love, friendship, and the focus on the family and neighbors. We weren't concerned about "drawing names" or what we wanted for Christmas. Nor did we hear about the fellow in the red suit, reindeer and sleigh.

On Christmas Eve, we gathered around the dining table for a simple supper with rice being the main dish. A glow of anticipation radiated from our faces. Dad did the farm chores early but stayed out longer.

"Why?" I once asked my mother.

"Oh," she replied, "we've always felt farm animals are special on Christmas Eve as they were the first to be near the new born Savior. So Dad gives all the animals an extra measure on Christmas Eve."

After supper we heard the Christmas story from Luke read to us and we practiced saying our Christmas pieces to be recited at the Saron Church the next day. My oldest sister played the organ and we sang. Then we were each given our gifts. Mother had knit long scarves and mittens for each of us. In addition, she had sewed new dresses for all five girls.

Christmas service at the church was the great event of the season. A large Christmas tree was placed in the sanctuary. Wax candles, pink, yellow, blue, green and white were inserted into metal holders which were clamped to the branches. Candles were lit at the appropriate time. My dad and uncle stood close by to watch and quickly extinguish any candle that was threatening the branches. There were no gifts under the tree. Apples were passed out as treats.

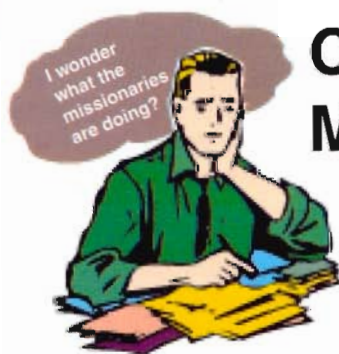
I don't remember a tree at our home. We made green and red paper chains at school to bring home to hang on the curtains. We had several large crepe paper

bells which could be folded up and saved for another year. Several weeks before Christmas the women, including my mother, were busy baking lefse, rosettes, fattimond, krumkakke, and batches of divinity and other candies. In this way the ladies were free to enjoy the Advent and Christmas seasons.

Christmas in the community seemed to bring a time for bonding. My aunts and uncles lived close by. Traditionally, each family would host a meal in their home and invite several families. There was no electricity or radio, only kerosene lamps and lanterns. The deep snow and the bitter cold didn't seem to dampen our spirits. Dad hitched up the horses to the bobsled, and with quilts over our heads we had nothing to fear. Because homes were opened up, relatives and friends could feel the warmth of that special season and enjoy the fellowship.

I can't instill enough in the minds of my family the joy we shared when I was a child. We didn't need all the Christmas frivolities seemingly required today. Now seventy years later I think back to a recent Christmas, when we were blessed in having our immediate family together for the first time in ten years — our four sons, two daughters and their spouses, eighteen grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. As they opened their many gifts, I wondered in my heart, was the focus on the love from the giver or was it on the gift?

When Jesus was born in the manger, in humble surroundings, His mother Mary had knowledge of His greatness, but quietly pondered it in her heart. If we celebrate Christmas, the birth of our Savior, with love in our hearts, it will be the most meaningful and joyful one yet.



Christmas on the Mission field

Jonathan and Tamba Abel,

April and Thomas

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M.S.

Brazil, South America

e-mail: tjabel@netms.com.br

Christmas is often a time when missionaries struggle with loneliness. Perhaps you have put off writing to our AFLC missionaries for that more convenient time. Now is that good time. Your card will be an encouragement!

(continued on next page)

The Abels will have a special Christmas program on Sunday evening, December 21st. Their congregaton had hoped their new building would be ready to worship in this Christmas but delays have changed their plans. They will spend Christmas in Curitiba with Tamba's parents. They expect to see Jonathan's brother, Paul and family and the David Nelson family, also spending Christmas in Curitiba.



Paul and Becky Abel, Joanna, Christina, Andrew and Matthew

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PR

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Teaching new Brazilian Christians to develop meaningful Christmas traditions continues to be a goal for the Paul Abel family. They seek to demonstrate Psalm 78:3-4, 7 to many in Brazil who reject the celebration of Christmas, even in the church. The Abels expect Arnie Anderson and other friends from Cokato, Minnesota, to spend Christmas with them at the ARCA. A couple from Georgia who are adopting two sisters will likely join them as well.

Sonja Dahl

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Sonja is beginning her second year in Brazil as a missionary-nurse and continues to work on the Campo Mourão campus and is in charge of the Miriam Infant Home. Her Christmas plans include spending time with the children at the orphanage and with friends from the church. She is planning something fun for the children, but admits to finding it hard to get into the Christmas spirit when it is so hot.

Todd and Barb Schierkolk,

Rachel and Megan

Apartado Postal 1515-C
Aguascalientes, AGS, Mexico

The Schierkolks begin their family Christmas celebration on the day after Thanksgiving when they open their Christmas boxes, set up the Advent wreath, the nativity scene and other household decorations. The Mexican people

celebrate Christmas in a grand way. Religious symbols are everywhere but the typical attitude toward the "Jesus Child" is imbedded in a warped concept of worship. But for the members at Springs of Living Water Church, they will gather on Christmas Eve to praise God for sending His Son to be the Light shining in the dark world. After the service, the Schierkolks will enjoy a large meal and celebration at the home of one of the members. This year will be marked by their family's special anticipation of the arrival of a new family member later in 1998.

Richard and Clara

Gunderson

Darwin and Mary Ann Jackson, Jeanette

Serving with World Mission Prayer League

19 Sur 4103 #1

Colonia Nueva del Carmen
Puebla, Puebla 72000 Mexico

Clara tells of her experience last Christmas in an article in this issue. The newly-arrived Jackson family shares the address of the Gundersons for the present. The Jacksons are feeling the full dose of culture shock as they begin learning the language and how to maneuver successfully through the unpredictable and dangerous roads of Mexico.

Timothy and Renata

Hinrichs

Serving with East European Mission Network

c/o Srubar

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73701 Cesky Tesin, Czech Republic

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The Hinrichs will again celebrate Christmas in the Czech Republic and with Renata's family in Poland. On Christmas Eve they will be served the Polish delicacy of carp, a sweet milk sauce, and Jell-O with cod as part of the

family dinner. After the meal, each family member breaks off a piece of oplatek (a pressed, wafer-like bread) before passing it on. This beautiful tradition is a time for reconciliation of passed wrongs, encouragement for what a blessing that person is, and a time to bless that individual for the coming year. Tim will again join the brass choir at the festive 5 a.m. Christmas Day service.

David and Sarah Nelson,

Samuel, Josiah and Rachel

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PR

Brazil, South America

e-mail:

davenelson@start.com.br

The Nelson family's Christmas plans will include a delicious Brazilian banquet with beans and rice at the Lar Parana Church. The ladies are making beautiful centerpieces out of green pop bottles. On December 21, the children from the church, including those from the Miriam Infant Home, will present a cantata for the evening service. Christmas Day will be spent with Australian missionary friends in Curitiba and is sure to be a day with an international flavor. How blessed to know that Jesus is the Lord of all nations.

It's a change!

The 1988 AFLC Annual Conference will be held June 17-21, at Red Wing, Minnesota. It was previously scheduled at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. Future issues will include more information.

Comforted by the Light

Dad had said he was coming in from fishing, so Mom and I sat in the car, at the dock waiting. Then we saw what we had been looking for: the light. It was a long ways off, but it was coming closer.

We were sure it must be the light of Dad's commercial fishing boat, and as I recall, most every time we were right.

It was comforting and exciting when we saw the light. It wasn't because of the beauty or the brightness of the light. It was because we knew who was on the boat the light was shining from. As the light got closer, it meant Dad was getting closer. Soon we would be together again. Life was always better when Dad was around.

Christmas is about the Light coming into the world, and life being better because of it. Then as now it seemed, for many people that the light was a long ways off and a long time coming. As a kid I would look down the river and wonder when we would ever see the fishing boat's light. Before that night in Bethlehem, many waited, wondering when the light would come. The light did come. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned (Isaiah 9:2, NIV).

When we see the Light, it is comforting. Darkness overflows with mystery. Who knows what danger is hiding in the shadow? Who knows what might come from that which can't be seen? Often when we can't see with our eyes, we imagine with our mind and we feed our fears. The dark room and the unknown future scares us. Life in "the land of the shadow of death" is frightening.

But then the Light comes and comforts us. It announces that our Protector is present and on the job. It exposes the darkness and shows the weakness of all that lurks in the dark, in comparison to the One who shines in the light. "The Lord is my light and my salvation — whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life — of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1, NIV).

Life is better. We are safe. Jesus is here.

The Light is also exciting. It is the source of life. Jesus said: "I am the light of the world. Who-

ever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12, NIV).

One day the electricity went off at my house about eight in the morning. It did not come back on till around three in the afternoon. I spent much of that time discovering what I could not do. I almost started to wonder if there is anything I use in the average course of a day that does not have to be plugged in. I was glad when the power came back on. Life just isn't the same without it.

Life just isn't the same without Jesus, the Light of the world. He says, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, NIV). A joyful and meaningful life cannot be experienced and enjoyed without the Light. He is "the true light that gives light to every man" (John 1:9, NIV).

Imagine a Christmas without any kind of light: no lights around homes, no Advent candles, no Christmas tree lights, no twinkling stars. It would be tragic. It wouldn't be the same. But it would be far worse if the Light of the world had not come that first Christmas. The darkness would be deadly.

Many only know the lights that get their power from a plug-in. Those can be nice, but it is far better to know the Light whose power is from above, "the true light that gives light to every

man" (John 1:9, NIV). What light are you walking in, rejoicing in and marveling at this Christmas?

The lights of this earth that glimmer and shine are often nice and a lot of fun, but they last for only a moment. The enjoyment they bring is only temporary. The Light sent from God to this dark world is a true and lasting cause of celebration.

It was great to see the light of my father's boat. It is even better, even more exciting and comforting, to see the Light of the Son, sent from the Father above. Have you seen that Light? Are you walking in that Light today?

"Come to the Light, 'tis shining for thee! Sweetly the Light has dawned upon me; Once I was blind, but now I can see — The Light of the world is Jesus" (#547 *Ambassador Hymnal*).

May you and yours revel in His Light this Christmas season!

— Pastor Craig Johnson

**Many only
know the
lights that
get their
power from
a plug-in.**

SOMETHING TO SHARE

Assertive evangelism



What a precious season we are having the privilege of enjoying once again. In addition to our own special opportunities to reflect on the birth of our Savior and to worship Him, this season often gives us opportunities to share Jesus and the meaning of His birth with those who do not know and believe what He has done for them.

A book I read recently seeks to encourage "Christian assertiveness." The author explained that assertiveness is the balance we should seek to have between the extremes of being either too passive or too aggressive. Assertiveness is born out of a confidence both of who we are in Christ and what we have to share about Him. Could I encourage you to be assertive with the opportunities set before you this season?

Jesus is a perfect example of proper assertiveness in His dealing with the woman at the well of Sychar, recorded in John 4. In the November 4, 1997 issue of *The Lutheran Ambassador*, we looked at three out of six elements of effective evangelism demonstrated by Jesus in that setting. They were:

1. Be obedient to God's leading.
 2. Be pro-active in initiating and leading conversation.
 3. Be creative.
- Now let's look together at the

final three elements of Jesus' example.

4. Be bold in exposing personal sin and the need for salvation.

Since no one will put their trust in Christ as Savior without first being convicted of sin and separation from God, we must not shrink back from speaking the truth about that need. Jesus lovingly but honestly (assertively) made the woman aware He not only knew of her numerous past marriages but also that she was now living with a man outside of marriage altogether (v. 16-18).

There can be a tendency on our part to soft-pedal sin lest we offend. God give us courage. Surely our words of law must never be spoken in arrogance or lovelessness — but they must be spoken if sinners are to be turned to the Savior.

5. Be undistracted when thrown curves.

Do you notice how the woman at the well tried to change the subject when the conversation began to get a little warm? "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet," she said. Then, she asked a question unrelated to the previous conversation. But Jesus used even this twist to bring her back to consideration of her relationship with God. Was she in a position to worship Him "in spirit and in truth"?

We don't need to pursue people

aggressively if their hearts simply are not open yet; on the other hand, there is a time to get conversation back on track tactfully when Satan is simply doing his best to derail soul-saving.

6. Be clear in presenting Christ and what He has to offer.

The woman's closing statement to Jesus is in verse 25: "I know that Messiah is coming. ... When He comes He will tell us all things." Can a person possibly be more clear or direct than Jesus was in His response in verse 26? "I Who speak to you am He." Earlier in the conversation, Jesus told the woman exactly what He had to offer as He told her of "living water."

What a shame if, in our own witnessing, we come to the point of having opportunity to give people the solution to their sin and, instead, give a clouded witness. Let's take Jesus' lead here, too. Just give the simple saving facts. Jesus is God's Son. He died for our sin. God grants forgiveness to all who trust in Him.

Father, help us in our opportunities for sharing our faith in this season and throughout the year to be assertive witnesses — sharing Jesus in wisdom, courage, and clarity of thought after Jesus' own effective example. Amen.

— Pastor Richard Long
Atonement Lutheran
Arlington, Washington