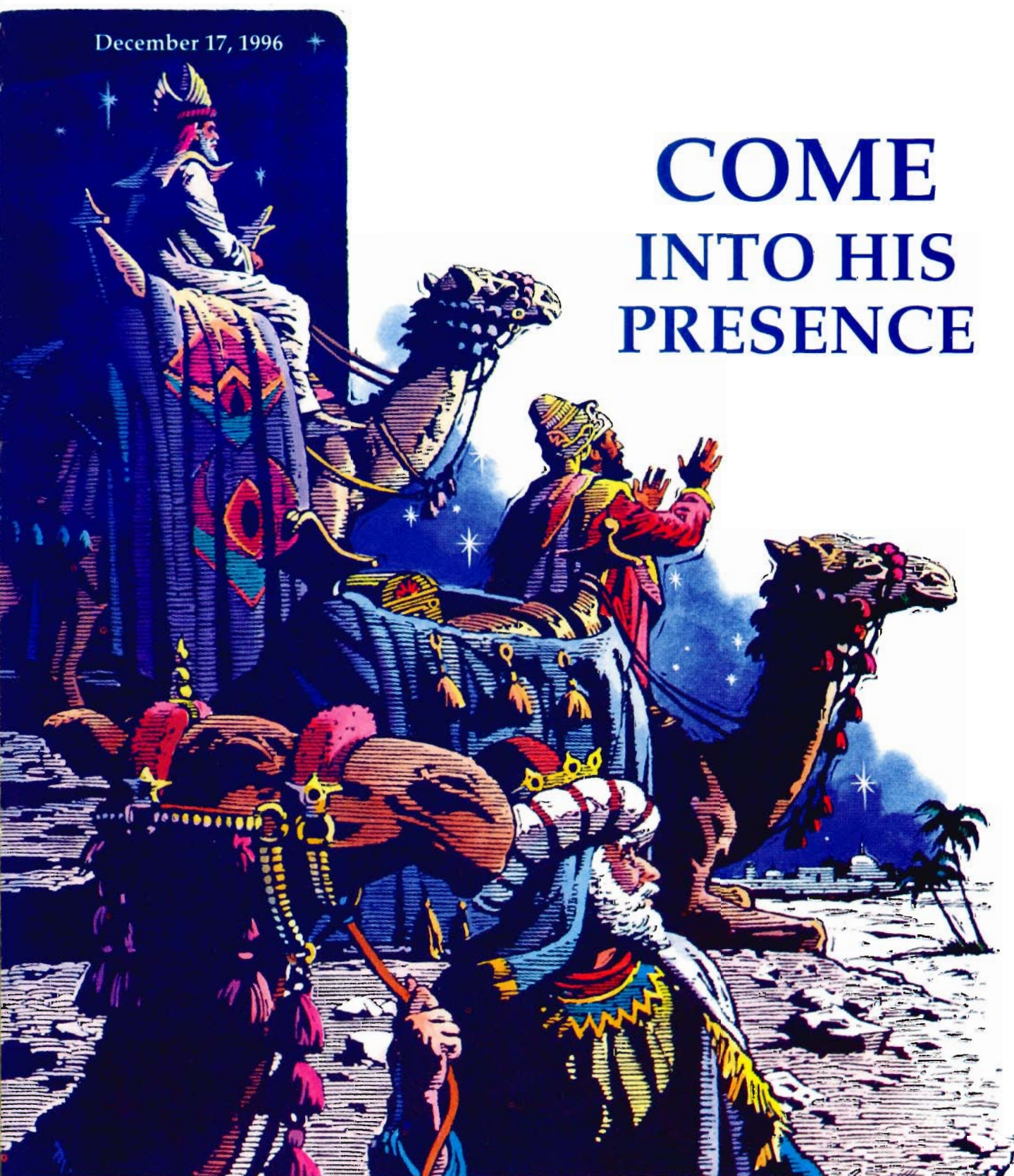


The Lutheran AMBASSADOR

December 17, 1996

COME
INTO HIS
PRESENCE



THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

December 17, 1996
Volume 34, Number 16



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

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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.

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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

Light pierces the darkness

The people which sat in darkness saw a great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death, light is sprung up.

— Matthew 4:16

When I was a child, I just loved the lights of Christmas. Each year on Christmas Eve, our custom was that one of us five kids would take our turn in decorating the tree with Mama and Papa. The door to the living room was closed and the other four of us would do the supper dishes. In our excitement we were through in a jiffy and lined up on a bench and chairs by the living room door impatiently waiting for them to open the door and let us come in.

It seemed hours.

When the door finally opened we rushed in with gasps of "ohs and ahhs" as we gazed on the beautiful tree all trimmed and shining bright with lit wax candles in little metal clips all over the tree. The room was aglow and gifts were under the tree. It was a brilliant and memorable sight.

I still love the lights of Christmas, on the tree and all over town, especially when I remember the true Light that they symbolize. We did not worship the candles those Christmas Eves. Mama and Papa always shared with us the story of the Christ, the Light who "gives light to every man" (John 1:9).

Jesus is God incarnate. John 1:4-5 teaches: "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not" (did not overcome it).

The light of the Son filled the darkened room — the world. The claim of Jesus is tremendous and true: "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life" (John 8:12).

As the hymn says, *How Glad I Am*

Each Christmas Eve, and throughout the year as I remember afresh that God sent His only beloved Son, Jesus, into the world and pierced the darkness. Jesus was born to die that we might live and have the light of life! No longer do we sit in darkness, fear and superstition when we have accepted Jesus. He came to enlighten our hearts and minds. He came to reveal the Father and His love for us. He came to redeem us. He came to deliver us out of the dark pit of sin.

I like the simple definition of light — the absence of darkness.

I also like the simple definition of darkness — the absence of light.

Light is symbolic of righteousness; darkness of sin. And, sadly, it is so true what God tells us in John 3:19, "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." The following verse is even worse, "Every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, that his deeds should be reproved."

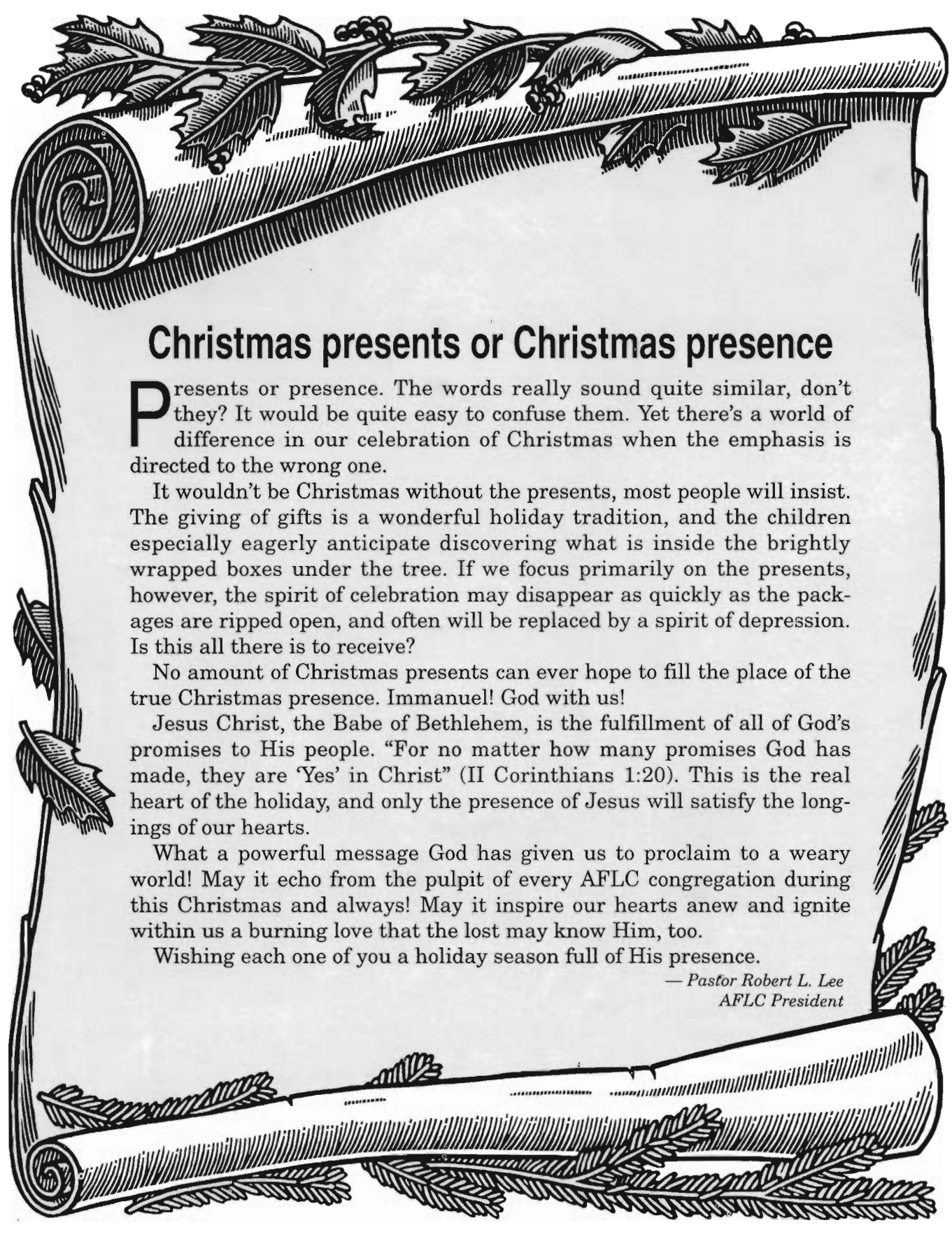
Christmas. God pierced the darkness.

May the Light make this Christmas the brightest you have every experienced. Of we who are Christians, Paul wrote, "For you were sometimes darkness but now you are light in the Lord: walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8).

Have a most blessed Christmas in Jesus — the Light of the world.



— Pastor Alvin
Grothe
Astoria, Oregon



Christmas presents or Christmas presence

Presents or presence. The words really sound quite similar, don't they? It would be quite easy to confuse them. Yet there's a world of difference in our celebration of Christmas when the emphasis is directed to the wrong one.

It wouldn't be Christmas without the presents, most people will insist. The giving of gifts is a wonderful holiday tradition, and the children especially eagerly anticipate discovering what is inside the brightly wrapped boxes under the tree. If we focus primarily on the presents, however, the spirit of celebration may disappear as quickly as the packages are ripped open, and often will be replaced by a spirit of depression. Is this all there is to receive?

No amount of Christmas presents can ever hope to fill the place of the true Christmas presence. Immanuel! God with us!

Jesus Christ, the Babe of Bethlehem, is the fulfillment of all of God's promises to His people. "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (II Corinthians 1:20). This is the real heart of the holiday, and only the presence of Jesus will satisfy the longings of our hearts.

What a powerful message God has given us to proclaim to a weary world! May it echo from the pulpit of every AFLC congregation during this Christmas and always! May it inspire our hearts anew and ignite within us a burning love that the lost may know Him, too.

Wishing each one of you a holiday season full of His presence.

— Pastor Robert L. Lee
AFLC President



— Dan Griffith, Spokane, Washington

Who is with you?

One night when I was four years old I was sleeping with my dad because my mother was in the hospital with my newborn baby sister. During the night, my foot touched something cold, round, smooth — under the covers at the foot of the bed. My horrifying thought: it was a snake! But my dad was sleeping right beside me and that reassured me!

In the morning, I discovered the object of terror. It was a metal pan that I had been snacking from before going to bed.

It makes a big difference when someone is *with* us in scary times, and *who* that someone is!

In the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:22-23), He is called Immanuel, which means “God with us.” Why is He called this? What does it mean that God is **with** us?

With us in location

It means that someone is physically with us — right here. This is the first meaning of Jesus’ name. Immanuel is God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who came down to live with us, His creatures.

John 1:14 says, “The Word became flesh, and dwelt (“tabernacled”) among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father.” In Jesus, God came to get to know us, and our situation. He tasted fully what it was like to be human. He experienced what it is like from the beginning to the end of our lives.

The word “tabernacled or tented seems to imply a temporary presence with us. Though we may be tempted to think God is no longer with us because Jesus is no longer physically present on earth, yet He still is because He has human form (demonstrated in His resurrection appearances). He knows what it is to be human. In this way He is permanently with us.

With us for a special purpose

Jesus is also “God with us” in that He came to earth for a special purpose: to

redeem us by His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. This has been accomplished. Jesus’ historical birth, life, death and resurrection are a permanent sign that God is with us. Though no longer visibly present on earth in the same way, His work of redemption continues. The work of the cross still stands for any who wish to make use of it to be saved. I Timothy 2:6 says that He “gave Himself as a ransom for all.”

Staying with us

Family and friends may come to visit us and stay with us for a while. Jesus is also present with us in this way today through the Holy Spirit. God is with us in our lives as we allow Him access into our hearts by faith. He makes His home in our hearts (Revelation 3:20).

Paying attention to us

When someone does not listen or pay attention to us, we complain of that one “not being with us.” Jesus is not a busy husband or father who gives us only token attention. Rather He bends over to hears us better. The psalmist tells us, “Because He has inclined His ear to me, Therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live” (Psalm 116:2). He thinks of us. We are on His mind. “Thou dost understand my thoughts from afar” (Psalm 139).

On our side

If someone fights alongside of us in battle, they are with us. A teammate is with us. Someone who speaks up for us in front of others is one who is with us. Paul writes in Romans 8:31-32, “If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” The coming of Christ tells us that God is on our side!

In all these ways Jesus is *Emmanuel* — *God with us!*



— Pastor Craig Wentzel
Living Word and Zoar Lutheran Parish
Edmore, North Dakota



savor the joy

“Thank goodness stay-at-home moms don’t have to work,” I thought as I loaded my two-year-old in the back seat of our hatchback. “Otherwise, when would I get my Christmas shopping done?”

I tucked my son’s snowsuit down, pulled the belt over his head, grabbed the bottom belt out from under him, and snapped his seat belt shut, while my foot kept track of where his six-month-old brother sat awaiting his turn.

Mentally I went through my list again. I had purse, diaper bag, keys and the library book I would soon drop off. I was ready! It had taken 20 minutes just to get us all in snowsuits and boots. I certainly didn’t want to forget anything.

Ten minutes later I was at the mall, reversing the procedure. As I pushed the stroller toward the store, an older woman passed by.

“You certainly have your hands full, don’t you?” Without waiting for a response, she walked on.

I stood staring after her for a minute and then looked down at my children.

“Yes,” I thought, smiling to myself. “Delightfully full.”

— Cindi Johnson
Emmaus Lutheran
Bloomington, Minnesota

Two thousand years ago, celebrating the first Christmas was also delightfully full. There wasn't a traditional birthday cake, but the sounds of cooing, the touch of a tiny hand, and the warmth of a human baby, kept Mary and Joseph well aware that their child had been born. The process of taking care of an infant, any infant, is old but straightforward and simple: the needs of the child come first. Yet it was that joy of being with the Son of God in His human fullness, that enabled Mary and Joseph to do their necessary tasks.

Today, things have changed. We don't feel we can even begin to celebrate Christmas until our tasks have been completed: cards have been written, baking has been done, and presents have been wrapped.

But where is our joy?

We clean, buy, decorate, bake, mail, eat, and finally collapse. But we continue to do and do! It's like we decide that Christmas cannot come until we have made our preparations!

But that's not true.

God already did all the preparing for Christmas.

He decided long ago that on this day a Baby would be born that would put our need "to do" on hold forever.

"The joy of the Lord is your strength" is in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. In chapter eight, verse ten, he tells the people not to be sad because of recently hearing and being convicted by the law, but to go out and celebrate the day with food and fellowship. "The joy of the Lord" would get them through the hard times they were having.

How does *joy* have any connection to *strength*?

"The joy of the Lord" is the joy of being **with** the Lord. As we tell Him our con-

cerns and ask for His guidance, we experience the reality of the presence of His Spirit. We focus on being with the Lord, not on what has to be done. His strength is given as we realize the joy of knowing and being with Him. Whatever the job, we are not alone. Christ's Spirit within us is real and sustaining.

Jesus' mother Mary had it rough. Her husband was a rookie and her mom was miles away. Of course she did what she had to, but her joy was in the knowledge she was with her Messiah!

So, as Nehemiah says, go out and celebrate if you want to. Call the maid to do the cooking and cleaning, save money by not sending out cards, and tell your sister



she is being honored with your presence Christmas Eve and Christmas Day!

But first, gather your young ones in your arms. Let them feel secure and loved. And then tell them you know about the greatest joy a Baby every brought and you want them to know it, too.

For unto us is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord!

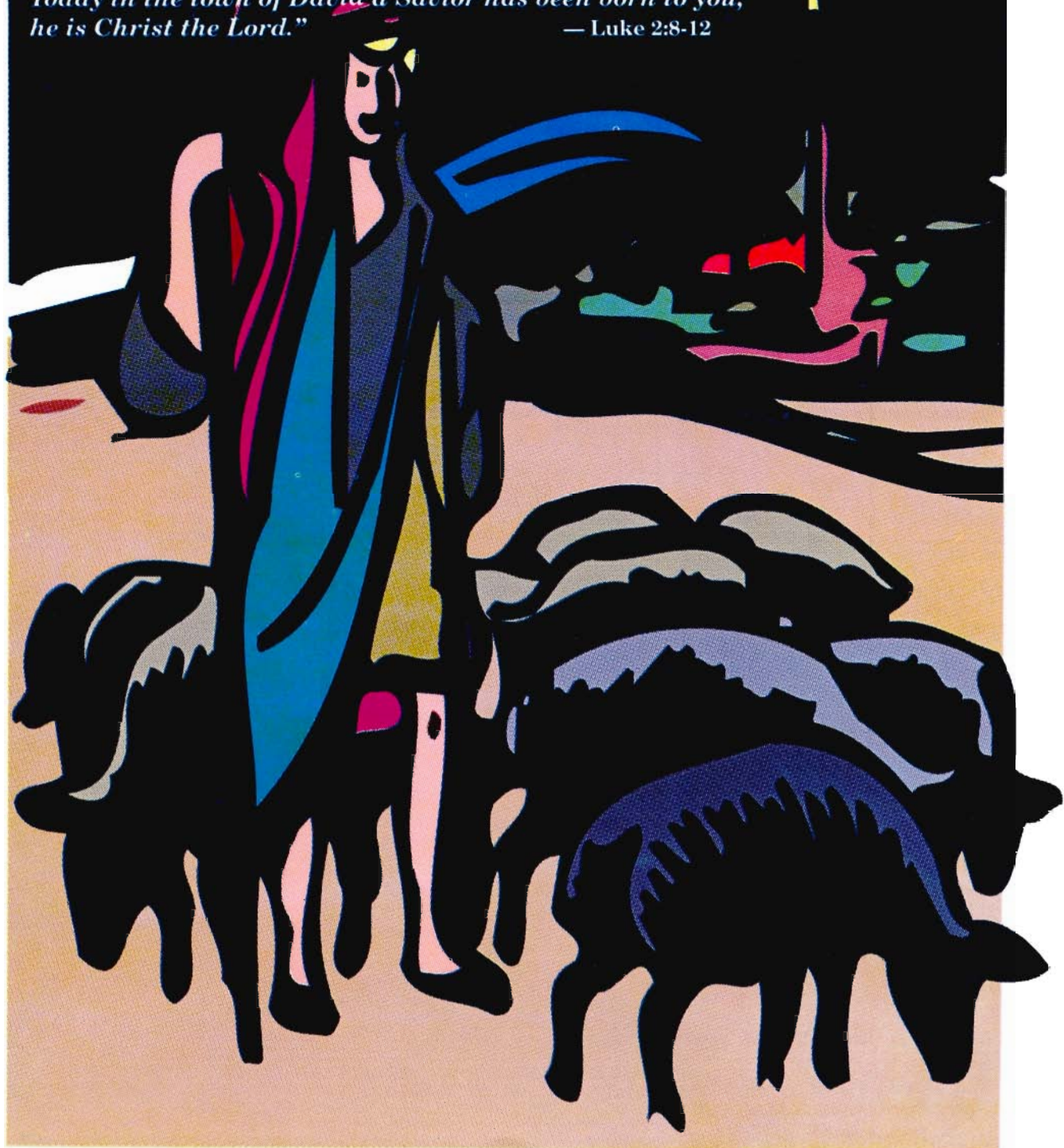


*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby,
keeping watch over their flocks at night.
An angel of the Lord appeared to them,
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were terrified.*

*But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid.
I bring you good news of great joy
that will be for all the people.*

*Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you;
he is Christ the Lord."*

— Luke 2:8-12



Resting in His presence

— James E. McMillen
Community Bible Church
Oceanside, California

The storm was raging, the boat was rocking and they feared it would sink. Even they who knew Him well feared for their lives. He said to His disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:40). How much more fearful would we have been had we been there ourselves!?

Living in today's world carries with it many fearsome challenges, but also many opportunities to respond with a spiritual attitude. A lot of people without hope get run over by these challenges and never recover. But faith can make a difference.

The pastor of a local church said, "Attitude is extremely important. As the thought life goes, so goes the attitude of living. That's a popular secular theme in today's world. But this positive-thinking movement is often missing an important element: God. Thinking positively doesn't translate into a healthy life. It may help but we don't have the power within ourselves to do it. The Bible says the only way to change is through God."

What is needed is for us to align our thoughts with God's thoughts. Only then can we find that necessary spiritual attitude to be able to rest in His presence.

I admit to a certain amount of fear for the future of my grandchildren. The damage to young people caused by a permissive culture that glamorizes sex, drugs, and profanity is enormous. While their minds are being filled with pornographic images, disturbing sounds and obscene lyrics, we are immobilized by fear. But isn't this an indication that we question God's ability to take care of us (cf. Genesis 46:3-4)?

God doesn't want us to live in constant fear and worry. He tells us this in many Scripture passages. He told Abram: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward" (Genesis 15:1). And to the disciples who were terrified He said: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid" (Mark 6:49). He wants us to rest in Him and let Him take care of us.

I have to constantly remind myself to practice the presence of Emmanuel in my own life and to rest in that presence for I

know this is what He wants me to do. As Moses said: "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still" Exodus 14:14.

The wonderful hymn set to the beautiful music of Sibelius says it best.

*Be still, my soul! The Lord is on thy side;
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul! thy best, thy heavenly*

Friend

Thro' thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

When we allow our fears to rule us, we make our fear more powerful than God.

My grandsons proudly wear their "No Fear" shirts to face their sport's challenges. I pray that as they grow older and perhaps wiser they can have a "No Fear" spiritual attitude toward life's challenges.

At times circumstances challenge our faith and our belief about God. Fear and worry can quickly take over and we can become out of alignment with God's thinking. As a musician I think of this as being out of tune with God. I take great pride in my sense of pitch and being able to play in tune. But I know that God has *perfect* pitch and all of His sounds are *perfectly* in tune. The person who needs to adjust his pitch in order to be in perfect harmony is me. In the song of my life I find I must constantly listen and adjust in order to stay in tune. The result is always a more pleasant and harmonious song.

When the Apostle Paul was in jail, he focused his thoughts on the Lord. He put aside his fear, began thinking like God, and found a spiritual attitude. When he did he was able to get beyond his immediate circumstances, rejoice in the Lord, and rest in His presence.

When we find ourselves worrying and fearful, we need to pray for a new attitude that aligns our thinking with God's. Then we're in tune with Him, and, like Paul, we can rejoice in the Lord and rest in His presence.





God with
us

as we worship

The Advent and Christmas seasons provide us with a wonderful opportunity to re-experience the anticipation and joy of Christ's coming. Amid the rush of our lives, the continuous cycle of the Church year gives us an important point of focus; its annual repetition satisfies our need for something that is new and yet familiar.

The worship life of our congregations can help us to experience anew the reality of Emmanuel's coming. It can also help us to see beyond the secular holiday that occurs at the same time, a commercial feast that begins and ends early, with tales of Santa Claus and red-nosed reindeer and — incidentally — a cute little baby in a manger.

In the Church, we have a different holiday, and a different calendar. Advent is

— Pastor Randy Moe
Our Saviour's Lutheran
Thief River Falls, Minnesota

the time of anticipation, when we look forward to the Savior's coming. The Church's celebration of Christmas begins on the Eve of Jesus' birth, and continues until Epiphany. Then, during the Epiphany season, we continue to see the unfolding of God's revelation in Jesus.

ADVENT

For hundreds of years, the people of God longed for the coming of the Savior. During Advent the hymns and Scripture lessons of the Church not only recall the anticipation of Christ's first coming, but point us forward to His coming again in glory.

As we sing *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, we pray for Jesus to come to each of us in a new and fresh way. We also express our longing for the fulfillment of His kingdom in eternity.

The *Ambassador Hymnal* provides us with a rich selection of Advent hymns. *On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry* (#328) reminds us of John the Baptizer and his divinely-appointed role as forerunner of Jesus. Other excellent Advent hymns include *Come, Thou Savior of Our Race* (#8) and *Hark the Glad Sound* (#12).

The lighting of the candles of the Advent wreath is another way to build our sense of anticipation. The wreath invites lay participation in lighting the candles and in reading the Scripture lessons and explanations as a new candle is lit each Sunday. Children can share in this experience through special sermons or readings of their own. Personal and family devotions enrich the worship experience as they center around the Advent theme.

CHRISTMAS

When Christmas Eve finally arrives, how wonderful it is to join in worship as God's people; to hear again, with the shepherds, the tidings of great joy. A candlelight service can remind us of the star that "shone forth to make the dark world bright," of the host of angels in the sky, and most of all the eternal Light who came to us that night long ago. Some congregations gather at dusk, others late in the evening. Whatever the hour, Christmas Eve is a time for quiet, reflective worship that helps us to experience the wonder of the night. It is a fitting time

Let us go to
Bethlehem
and find His love.



— Susan Parsley, Pipestone, Minnesota.

to share in Holy Communion, where Emmanuel comes to us in a tangible way. Contemplative hymns such as *Silent Night* (#23) and *Of the Father's Love Begotten* (#49) assist our worship.

Christmas morning dawns bright with joy. Joyful hymns and carols express the rejoicing of our hearts. Emmanuel is born! The Savior has come! This is the Church's great festival day, second only to Easter Sunday. We gather to celebrate the fulfillment of our hopes, and to be assured that just as Jesus came once before, He will come again. Joyful hymns of celebration such as *Shout the Glad Tidings* (#48) and *Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light* (#49) express the emotions of our hearts.

EPIPHANY

The time of rejoicing continues through the traditional twelve days of Christmas, the time from Christmas to Epiphany —

the day of manifestation. On Epiphany we remember the coming of the wise men to Jesus, and their presentation of gifts to Him. The glory of Jesus is revealed.

During the Epiphany season we see not just a helpless babe in a manger, but our Savior, the Son of God, revealed ever more clearly. Here, too, family and personal devotions enrich our individual understanding of what we experience together in worship. Hymns such as *Brightest and Best of the Sons of the Morning* (#58) and *Songs of Thankfulness and Praise* (#59) help us to experience the meaning of Epiphany.

Through worship, as we gather to listen, to sing, and to pray, we can practice the presence of Emmanuel in a way that strengthens our faith, increases our devotion, and encourages our witness as God's people.



Free Lutheran Seminary

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.
— Titus 2:11

How we thank and praise God for sending His only Son that we might be saved! What a glorious message we have to proclaim to our dark world!

Jesus, the Son of God, graciously appeared in human flesh for our salvation. But not only for our salvation, but also for our sanctification. The "grace of God" instructs us to "deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12). Yes, we are called and empowered to *practice the presence of our Immanuel*.

A blessed Christmas to you all from our seminary staff and students. Thank you for your faithful prayer support and gracious gifts so that the work of the seminary can go forward. Keep on praying!

— Dr. Francis and Ellen Monseth

Department of Parish Education

The Board of Parish Education rejoices in the celebration of Christ's birth and also in the acceptance of the call by Mrs. Marian Christopherson to be Director of Parish Education. She has served for several years in our Bible school as the Choral Club director and Christian Education instructor. Her husband Kevin is a Minneapolis-area paint store manager. We offer this space to her to extend to you her own personal greeting.

*O holy child of Bethlehem! Descend to us we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Immanuel!*

"Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us" (Isaiah 25:9). He

Youth Department

As our family gathers for Christmas around the lefse and romagrote that my wife has made we will reflect on this past year of ministry. We remember how warmly our family has been received across the country. Nathan, Andrew, and Naomi remember swimming, volleyball, and campfires, slugs, skits, friends and frogs. It has been a blessing to meet the many great people that make up the AFLC. This group feels much more like a family. I have truly sensed people *practicing the presence of Immanuel*. It has been a privilege to serve you this year as the youth ministries director and I look forward to meeting more of the members of our family of faith.

—Pastor Kevin and Pam Olson

came in human flesh to dwell among us, to teach us how to live and to love. He came as a blessed Savior of mankind to bring deliverance from the darkness and despair of sin. And for those who believe, He lives with us in our hearts (Luke 17:21). The ever abiding presence of Christ within, strengthens and preserves us by His grace, that we might walk in His ways, until we reach the heavenly kingdom where He shall be with us, and we with Him for all eternity.

This Christmas season, may you know the light of Christ's presence in your hearts, and allow Him to shine forth through your lives to bring everlasting hope to a fallen world.

— Marian and Kevin Christopherson





Free Lutheran Bible School

If I could give you, our AFLC family, a gift this Christmas, it would be one good, hard glimpse of our students this year. You should see the spirit and fire of the AFLBS senior class. The junior class isn't so bad, either! But I wish you could see the joy and spirit of the seniors. So many of them are zealous for the Word, eager to witness, ready to work. I'm seeing people who have experienced salvation through Jesus — and want to share it with others. That's what I call Immanuel. You see "God with us" by seeing Jesus in their lives. What a privilege to teach them and serve as their dean!

Keep praying for us. We ended the first quarter with 106 students — and we look to add more this next quarter. Some of them will need financial help to keep going — but I know the Lord can provide. Our gospel teams have been a particular blessing to me. Pray for our eight teams that they will go out with boldness and proclaim the salvation message of Immanuel, the baby born to save sinners like us. I believe our AFLC, and our nation, will be blessed in the next decade as we see these new evangelists going out, living and working among us. Feel free to invite a team, or myself, to your church after Christmas. And feel free to drop in on a class or two any time this winter. We'd love to have you.

— Pastor James and Linda Johnson

Home Missions

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

— Isaiah 7:14

Immanuel — God is with us. What a wonderful thought to ponder this Christmas season! Immanuel has come, and He has provided for us the greatest gift of all — the gift of salvation.

This gift is not only to be enjoyed later in life: we have the opportunity to experience God's presence today. He desires to live in our hearts and to lead us in our present pilgrimage. We in the AFLC can truly give thanks for our pastors and congregations, and all who know Immanuel personally. As we look to the new year, may we be in prayer that we will be effective witnesses: lighthouses offering rescue from the wiles of our flesh, and leading others to the safe harbor found in Christ.

We wish you all a blessed Christmas, and thank you for your prayers and support.

— Pastor Paul and Laurie Nash

World Missions

In him was life, and the life was the light of men ... there was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.

— John 1:4,9

May He who came as the Light of the world so fill you with His joy and grace that you may shine forth with His light to a world where so many are still in spiritual darkness. Shine for Jesus!

Blessed Christmas from your AFLC World Missions family.

— Pastor Eugene and Beverly Enderlein

The crowded stores, the high prices, Christmas baking and tired, aching feet are all a part of Christmas. Or are they?

Christmas is rejoicing in the greatest gift of all, our Lord and Savior. It's beautiful music, Christmas cards and messages from loved ones and friends, parties and dinners, special church services and fun for the children.

What Christmas means to me

— Dorothy Olson
Helmar Lutheran
Helmar, Illinois

I recall the days as a child when we had no Christmas tree because my father said, "That was a pagan custom." We hung up three stockings behind a little room heater. I didn't expect Santa to fill the stockings because my Daddy would do it.

Early Christmas morning, I would run to see what was in the stockings. The first was filled with corn cobs which was my father's method of teaching me how to accept disappointments. But the second stocking was filled with big oranges and the third with candy.

It was a treat to watch Daddy make taffy. He cooked that syrup mixture to a "crack" stage, poured it out on a greased surface, let it cool a bit, and began to pull it into rope-like shapes. Mother and I couldn't stand to handle that hot stuff but Daddy's hands were callused from hard work.

Christmas dinner meant a roasted goose served with dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy and all the trimmings. A suet (plum) pudding or a mince pie reflected my father's English heritage.

Though we didn't go to church in those early days, Daddy always led us in daily devotions no matter how busy he was. I recall his voice loud and clear, reading from his well-worn Bible while Mother and I sat very still and listened. "There shall be two in the field, the one taken and the other left" (Matthew 24:40). I didn't want to be the one left or be one of the five foolish virgins with no oil in their lamps when the door was shut and the Lord said, "I never knew you."

Later I could attend Sunday school with some neighbor children. Saturday night began the preparation to go when my mother wrapped my long hair around long strips of white cloth, fastened the ends and the next morning, when the rags were unrolled, I had long curls. Eventually I was baptized, confirmed and became an active member of that Methodist church.

My teaching career began in 1921 in a one-room, rural school. Each morning the pupils and I recited the Lord's

Prayer before we began our work. Our favorite Christmas story was "Snippen's Dilemma." Snippen was a little Norwegian nisse who helped the poor and needy. The theme was that Christmas is a good time to help others and bring joy to saddened hearts, as well as tell others about the age-old story of Jesus' birth.

In 1929, I married Leonard Olson. Then I joined the Helmar Lutheran Church which has a rich heritage and desire to add souls to God's kingdom. During a series of meetings, a pastor from Brooklyn led a Bible study where I learned I had a form of godliness but not that close fellowship with Jesus with which I am now so richly blessed. Praise the Lord!

"I learned I had
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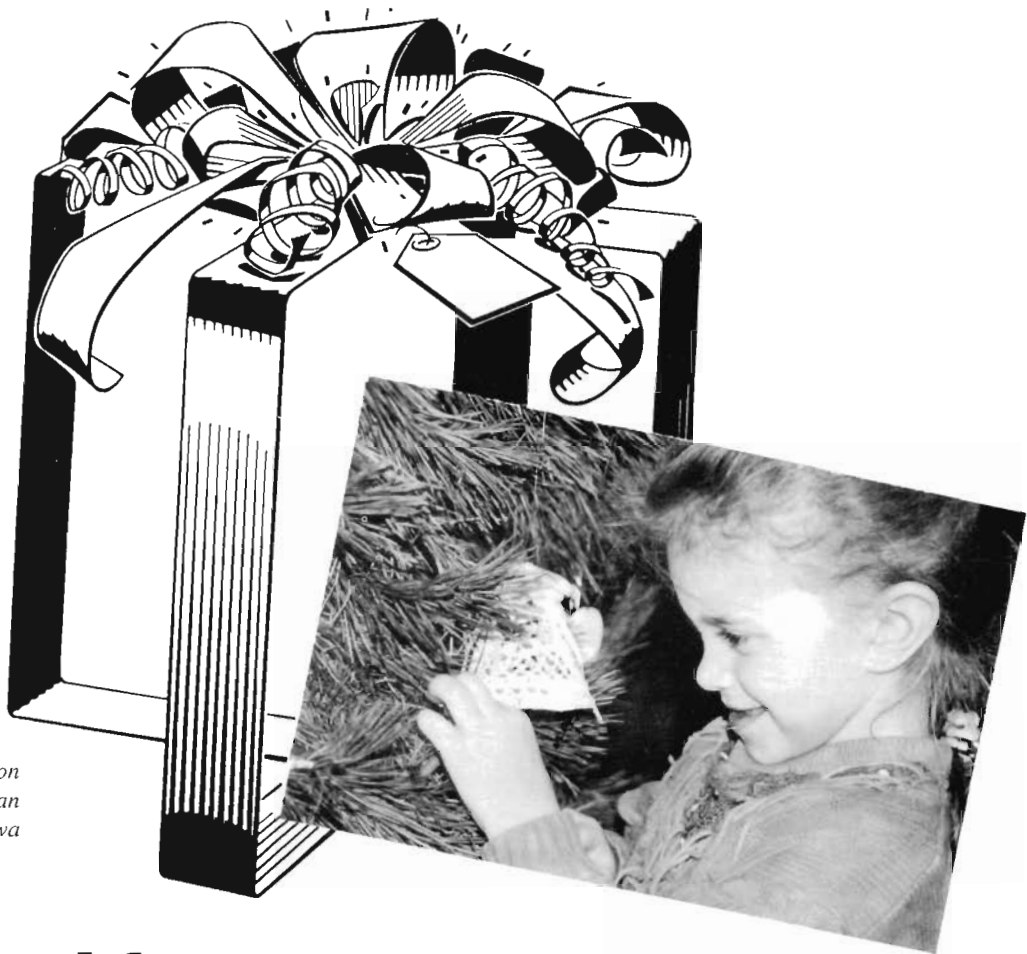
The beautiful message of the annual Christmas cantata, the Sunday school program, the sermons, cards and letters all help to awaken the Christmas spirit within us and to share that story, old, but ever new.

The Christmas turkey, lutefisk, lefse, krumkaka, raspekumla, fruit cake are wonderful, but they fade in comparison to the greatest of these blessings of knowing Jesus as personal Savior and sharing Him with those who know Him not.

Jesus said, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

A blessed Christmas.





— Jeanette E. Larson
St. Paul's Lutheran
Jewel, Iowa

The gift of a child

It was three days before Christmas and I was hopelessly behind schedule in Christmas preparations. The cleaning, done earlier, was totally undone when our furnace malfunctioned. I wiped soot from the window sills, off the floors, walls, and furniture and shook it from the drapes.

Twenty-two guests were coming for Christmas, so I frantically struggled with the cleaning. Family members would help later but there would be so many things to do. I was stuck. I could only press on in what seemed to be a hopeless situation.

I groaned when I heard a knock at the door. But as I opened it, a ray of sunshine beamed forth on a little boy bearing Christmas gifts and wearing a

smile as broad as his face. His blond hair peeked out from under his stocking cap and his blue eyes sparkled as he greeted me with a hearty "Merry Christmas!"

Tim was our nine-year-old city friend who came often to help on the farm. Putting down his gifts, he dashed out to the farrowing house.

He returned to the house at noon. Soberly he looked around the house and when we sat down to eat he announced, "I think I'll stay in this afternoon. I really think we ought to get the tree up!"

He vacuumed and dusted and decorated.

I saw him carefully unwrap the nativity scene and gently place the

wise men near Mary and Joseph and the baby. He grinned a little as he placed a cow near the stable.

It didn't take him long to learn how to assemble our artificial Christmas tree while chattering about how his family had gone out in the woods and cut their tree. He gently strung the lights about the tree and hung the decorations —

the red balls,
the etched glass ornaments,
the snowflakes.

And then smiling, he stood back to admire his work. All too soon his father arrived to pick him up and he bounded off, still possessing his youthful, untiring energy.

That night I parked my crutches beside my bed, and crawled in with a song in my heart. A little boy had rescued me from a hopeless situation and given me renewed hope just as the Christ child brought new hope to the world hundreds of years ago.



Celebrate Christmas creatively

— Susan Parsley
Christ the King Lutheran
Pipestone, Minnesota

Christmas is a time when we all seem to put forth some effort at making our homes festive. We select just the right card to send to our friends and family, and create some “masterpiece” to give as a gift or put on the tree. Our churches are lovingly and gracefully adorned.

As a Christian artist, I see this as just one way in which we can use God’s gift of creativity to promote His work on earth. Artwork in the Church is a spiritual gift. It was given to Bezalel and Oholiab in the Old Testament “to make artistic designs ... and engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship” as they built the tabernacle (Exodus 35:30-35). God continues to use artwork to reflect His purpose and glory, and artistic influence is felt by us all.

Stained glass windows are a good example of this influence. The early church in the Middle Ages was the center of the average man’s life. Built on the highest spot in town and taller by far than any other building, the glorious structure was constructed by funds given generously by rich and poor alike. The poor serf, in his brown, drab clothes, eating plain meals, and residing in an ordinary mud hut, would enter the church — and suddenly be transported into an overwhelming, brilliant, sunlit space, filled with color from stained glass windows, elaborate statuary, and glorious music echoing off the towering stone walls.

It did not matter that he could not understand the service in Latin; the stained glass told the story. Panels

illustrated the Bible and this was especially convenient since the majority of the congregation was illiterate. Topics included the life of Christ, apostles and saints, and the history of the Church. Symbolism was used to fill in details — a lily was often included in a window with the Virgin Mary to show purity.

The most famous symbol was the Jesse Tree. It represented Isaiah’s prophesy that the Messiah would descend from Jesse, King David’s father. It depicted a tree growing from Jesse’s loins with Mary as its stem and Christ as the flower.

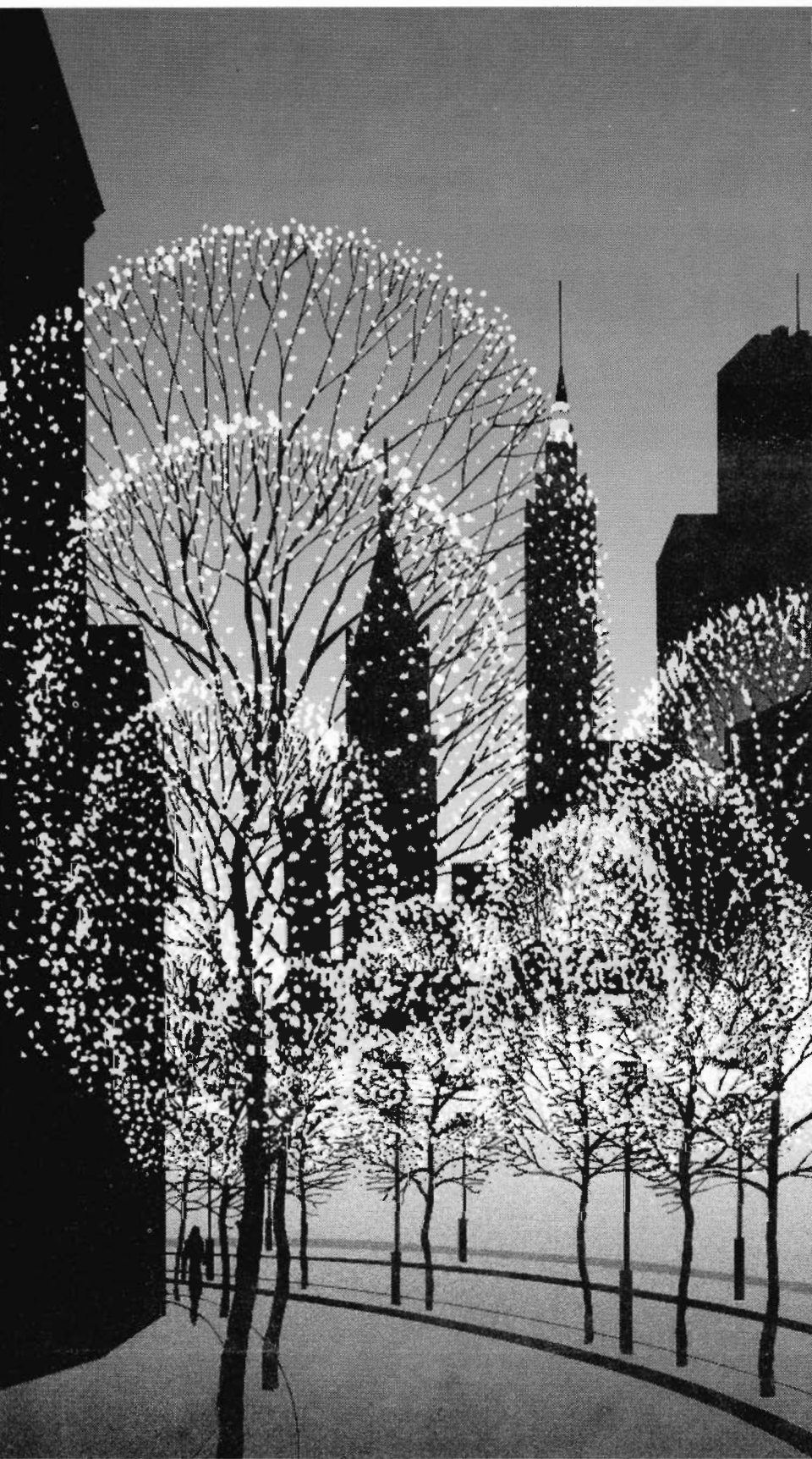
Window placement had meaning as well. The congregation faced east so they would be able to see Christ’s return. Often eastern panels show Christ ascending into heaven as the Good Shepherd, or part of the Trinity. Those in the north, or the dark side of the church would depict the fall of man or the last judgment.

Thus these decorative elements, as well as others, served a dual purpose — educated the parishioners and glorified God.

I believe that how we choose to celebrate the Messiah’s birth creatively can also serve a dual purpose. We teach our children and others by what we fill our homes and churches with at Christmas time. Our carefully selected or lovingly made decorations express our faith in a beautiful way that also glorifies God.







A help in the *lonely* times

Over the years I have experienced times of loneliness. I was left alone two Christmas seasons while my husband-to-be fought overseas in World War II. Though I was with my parents, I felt alone because the one I loved was absent.

We had a secret Bible verse code which he used to end his letters, and that would tell me where in the world he was. One verse was, "There is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:14). We both knew Jesus as our Savior and friend so we could rejoice in His presence with us. Clarence returned in 1945, and soon we were married.

The Christmas of 1970, was another time of loneliness. One of our sons had been killed in a car accident that December and we missed him. My elderly mother-in-law was living with us at the time and our son's girl friend came from a distance and stayed for several days. So we were busy caring for them and sharing our love and concern. Knowing the Lord and having His presence with us helped us to minister to others — a remedy for our loneliness.

Then in the spring of 1993, Clarence passed away. Our children returned to their respective homes and I knew loneliness as I rattled around our large farm home of 47 years. This was during the Easter season and again the glorious Easter message of the resurrection came to bless and comfort me.

— Vivian Wall
Hosanna Lutheran
St. James, Minnesota

Now at age 80, I live in senior citizen housing where out of 23 units, sixteen are occupied by widows. I have visited with many regarding their experience on how to combat loneliness — the result of the absence of personal intimacy or meaningful activity. Comments include:

- My faith in the Lord and prayer is a great help.
- Don't just sit there and feel sorry for yourself — get up and do something, even if it is cleaning out a drawer that doesn't really need it.
- We need to learn to be content.
- Spiritual counsel of a pastor helps.
- Family and friends are a great help.

Some say that the Christmas season is the loneliest time of the year. Perhaps that is because we think of family togetherness at Christmas. If that togetherness isn't possible, then there is loneliness. Separation hurts. It can strike one at any age. Perhaps it is being triggered when the youngest child leaves home to establish their own home. Retirement time may bring it on when one is less active and seeing fewer people each day. Even young people can be lonely in the midst of their family or their crowd.

Scripture and hymns are a great comfort for me. "My grace is sufficient for you" (II Corinthians 12:9) and it is new every morning! I have found a friend in Jesus. He's everything to me. As a Christian I do not sorrow as those who have no hope. I have a heavenly Father preparing a place for me. What a joyful reunion in heaven awaits me.



Youth notes

Gifts money can't buy

I have received some great gifts in the past, but many of them are no longer around and some of them have been forgotten. I do remember three gifts that stand out above the others and will last as long as I live.



The first was Dan. He was an intern at the church I was attending. I remember playing catch, ping pong, building a snow fort, and taking guitar lessons from him. He led some of our youth events, but I don't remember much of what he said. I guess what he did spoke so loud that the words really didn't matter. I knew that he loved Jesus, and I knew that he loved me. For a seventh grader, love was the greatest gift I could have received.



The second was Joel. When we moved to a new town I needed something desperately. I needed a friend, and Joel was that friend. He accepted me as I was, with all of the strangeness of my personality. We did all kinds of things together from homework to hunting; from boating to biking; and

we even dated the same girl. More than once he gave me the advice I needed to stay out of trouble. For a lonely ninth grader, friendship was a gift that money just could not buy.



The third was John. John was tall and I was small. He lived on a farm. I was from the city. He was older and we probably had few things in common. I sat by John one Sunday at church. At that moment we didn't talk much, but I remember that his face radiated with joy and he was excited to be worshipping Jesus. I remember his simple sincere faith in God and his desire to serve Him. John encouraged me to join the ministry team that he was involved in, and by doing so he displayed his faith in me. Seeing an example of a living faith in God and a personal faith in me is a gift that I will always treasure.

Working with you is a ministry of giving. There is a cost, but the value is far greater than the price. Jesus gave His disciples the gifts of love, friendship, and faith. These are three priceless treasures that you can give as well. Try practicing the presence of Immanuel with the youth in your life.



— Pastor Kevin Olson
AFLC Youth Ministries Director

**Try practicing the presence
of Immanuel with the youth
in your life.**

Christmas

*It seems like single memories from
the early years of childhood
and years of youth become
more plain as the years go by.*

The first Christmas Eve I remember clearly and distinctly began with a sleigh ride from a working man's apartment in Sarpsborg to my paternal grandparents' farm home in Tune. By the church, the horse Brown turned off the main road and took a single winding sleigh track over Tune Lake. Mother and we five children filled the sleigh. Grandpa and Father

walked beside it on the packed snow. The steady jingling of the sleigh bells and creaking of the harness and runners has followed me through the years like an echo. On both sides stood spruce forests dark and thick and snow-flecked. Light from solitary farms looked like fallen stars among the stretches of trees. At the north point of the lake, Brown began the

climb up the long sloping hills by the Hollegøy estate, where there were sparkling lights in all the windows, and further up to Grandpa's more modest farm.

There in the doorway stood Grandma Dehlin — Grandma and two unmarried uncles who were the best trolls when it came to dealing with children. They were filled with pranks, story songs, tricks and games.

The Christmas tree was adorned with lights and sugar-glazed Christmas cake men. Before the third day of Christmas they would be sadly reduced to "men cut in half." If a fellow in an unguarded moment bit off one leg, that tasted so good he couldn't keep from eating leg number two. The Christmas cake men needn't take such a tempting posture, shouldn't appear so tantaliz-



memories

ing. They ought to be in cake boxes in Grandma's cupboard, so they also could have a chance to come forward at Easter, smelling of long confinement.

Walking around the Christmas tree took place, Christmas carol after Christmas carol and every stanza in each. No one needed a carol or hymn-book. Everyone, both small and big, could sing without them. And then to a place around the festive table with the delicious aroma of rice porridge, with sugar, cinnamon and large lumps of butter. And when the last spoonful of porridge had disappeared, Grandpa took out the old Bible. Slowly and with festivity he read the Christmas Gospel.

I wasn't bigger than that I had my chin on the edge of the table. I saw the outline of the large open Bible and Grandpa's pale face with the great white whiskers. That's the way God must look, I thought.

Such was Christmas Eve at the old "Haugianer" farm in Tune. The young boy saw God's Book and God's face.

Then we sang the hymn which has attended our family as long as any of its living members can remember, "In That Sweet Christmas-time." We sang all seven stanzas with all our might, slowly and clearly.

I was the first one up on Christmas morning, I thought. I stole outside and ran shivering across the yard toward the stable to see if Nissen (a Norwegian mythical creature) had eaten up his portion of the Christmas porridge. And he had. Then I got really frightened when I heard a voice coming from the stable. Was Nissen inside right now?

I couldn't control my curiosity; the door stood ajar and, holding my breath, I peered inside. There in an empty stall beside Brown and her colt, Grandpa knelt and prayed. It wasn't until some years later that I realized I had been in Grandpa's private closet that Christmas Day morning.



— Harald Stene Dehlin
journalist, Oslo, Norway



*I shall be very old before
I forget childhood Christmases.*



from *Familiens Jul*.
(translated by Pastor Raynard Huglen)

The longest hours I can remember

In my childhood home, which lay 10-12 kilometers from Grimstad, we were eight brothers and sisters. We had to go out to work as early as possible, especially my sisters, who had positions in homes and businesses in Grimstad.

At that time the roads to town were very poor and the only possibility of contact was with horses. Because of that we didn't see them very often.

But Christmas Eve, that was the day we all got together with Father and Mother. I remember especially one Christmas Eve — it was bitterly cold and there was much snow, and a neighbor had gone to Grimstad to get my three sisters. The snow was so deep that the trip to town and back again took much longer than we had reckoned. We were five who were in the ages of five to 11 years who went out and in the door constantly. Always there was one of us out on the steps to listen for the sleigh bells in the terrible cold. Those were the longest hours I can remember having as a child.

Preparations for Christmas in the country were in themselves something looked forward to all fall: butchering, baking, cutting wood, and finally, everyone taking a bath. Mother heated water in a large kettle used in butchering and emptied it into a wooden tub where we were to

bathe, the youngest with her help and the older ones taking care of themselves. That was a little of a high point because it took place before Christmas Eve in the afternoon. After that, Christmas began.

Mother decorated the Christmas tree in the living room, while we waited in great suspense, and then she threw open the door to all the world's glory.

After that we went to the Christmas table — we tasted of all that had been baked and cooked and pickled and roasted. At last Mother or one of the oldest children read the Christmas story.

The waited-for-time after supper meant the certainly quite small and simple things which lay under the Christmas tree. Nevertheless, they gave us a joy which the large gifts of today can hardly give.

I have often thought about Christmas Eve at home as something we cannot duplicate today. We can't recreate the Christmas spirit — that joy and peace from my childhood home is difficult to duplicate in our modern, technical society. And I suppose also, it is hard to find the great happiness Mother must have felt when, in the midst of all her toil, true thankfulness sparked toward her in her children's eyes.



— Toralf Westermoen
industrialist, Mandal, Norway



And the shepherds
went back,
glorifying and praising
God
for all that they
had heard and seen.

Luke 2:20

— Rosalie Paulson, Fosston, Minnesota

Enjoying His presence

My cat enjoys seeing me come home when I have been gone awhile. I'm afraid, though, her joy doesn't stem from an experience of loneliness and a longing for my company. I do not think she is extremely excited about listening to what I have to say. She is pleased to see me because she knows that I can, and most likely will, soon open a can of her food and serve it to her.

Cats tend to be more interested in what we can do for them than in who we are. We humans far too often have similar feelings toward one another. We just work harder than cats at covering it up.

In her younger days my mother was a very active lady. Our family never wondered if or who was going to do the cooking, wash the clothes or clean the house. Mom took care of all that. Plus she was a frequent chaperone on outings and "taxi driver" for kids. She was also a leader in the congregation's ladies' aid for a number of years and fixed and brought to church many a hot dish, Jell-O salad and gjeitost sandwich.

But then age took its toll. Her mind was still strong, but her body wasn't. She who had taken care of so many for so long, now seemed to need more help than she was able to give. It was frustrating. She wanted to care for others instead of be in a position where they had to care for her. She was unable to do what she had done before, and so she wondered how she could contribute, how she could serve.

My mother made a significant contribution to her family during her last years. She did some but, at least compared to the past, not much cooking or cleaning. She could not give rides, but instead needed them. She no longer, with her husband, provided a home for her children, but instead needed to move into the home of one of her sons.

Her contribution changed in some ways, but in others it was the same it had always been. She served by the means of her presence. She was a listening ear, a compassionate heart, a caring soul, a praying friend. She was herself: a unique creation of God, a child of the King. Even when she could no longer be busy "doing," she served her family and friends by "being" the person God made her to be.

It is good and appropriate to appreciate what

people do, but let us also be thankful for who they are. Let us not fix all our attention on what people do for us or give to us this Christmas. Let us learn to appreciate the gift of one another, the gift of a person's presence, the gift of them being who God has called them to be.

May we not merely give a lot of things that can be wrapped up and put under a tree or accomplish deeds that can be marked down in a book. Let us give our lives and ourselves to God and to one another. It wasn't Martha and her "doing" but Mary and her "being" present at Jesus' feet that pleased Him the most (Luke 10:38-42).

God is not interested only, or even primarily, in what we can do for Him. God did not create us because He needed slaves to help Him get His work done. He created ones with whom He could enter into a loving relationship; ones with whom He could be friends.

God does not want your works this Christmas as much as He wants you. In the eyes of people your contribution may be great or it may be small. If your gift to God is your heart and your life, the gift is acceptable to God through Christ. It is highly valued and greatly appreciated by Him.

Let us appreciate God's great gift to us. It is not so much that He accomplishes spectacular feats, although He certainly can and does; or that He does everything we want

Him to, which He doesn't. God's great gift is Himself, Immanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). He is an "ever present help" (Psalm 46:1, NIV). We fear not because He is with us (Isaiah 41:10). We look forward to eternity, not so much because of what will be done for us or given to us, but because then it will be said, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3, NIV).

Because the Word has come and lived among us (John 1:14), we can enjoy life in the presence of God, both now and for all eternity.

May you and yours have a wonderful Christmas, celebrating the Christ who has come!



—Pastor Craig Johnson

**God does not
want your
works this
Christmas as
much as He
wants you.**

SOMETHING TO SHARE

Longing for home

During the Christmas of 1944 when U.S. troops were stationed in the South Pacific, the Japanese played the Bing Crosby tune, "I'll Be Home For Christmas" on short-wave radio in attempts to lower the U.S. morale. In despair, some soldiers wept, but others welcomed the familiar Christmas sounds that brought warmth to their hearts.

Like the soldiers in a foreign land, people have a natural longing for home. All over the world, home is where family interaction, loving affection, understanding, acceptance, nourishment, and protection is or should be provided. The gathering of loved ones at Christmas makes home even more special.

Christmas reminds us, however, of a greater longing that all people are created with. God created people in His image in order that we can be at home with Him always. Sin separated us from our eternal dwelling. The psalmist cried out, "As a deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?" (Psalm 42:1-2, NASB).

The incarnation — God with us — made it possible for us to be at home with God. Jesus said, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My

Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our abode with him" (John 14:23).

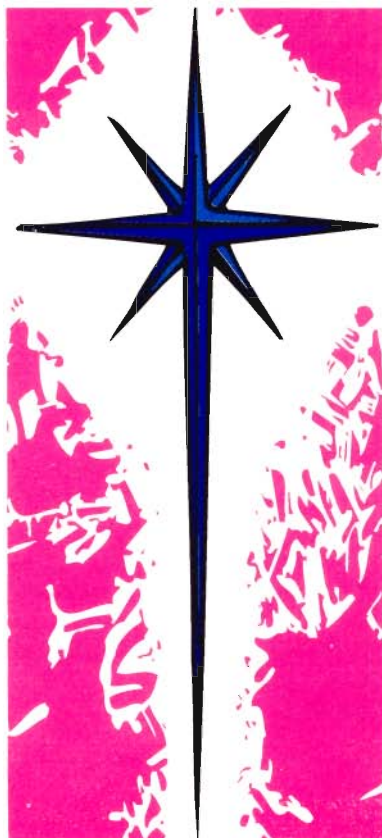
What an opportune time to minister the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who do not have the joy of Christ and the true meaning of Christmas! Some hearts are more tender during this time

of year, while others are sad and lonely without a true understanding of salvation.

Is there a neighbor who does not know the blessings of forgiveness and the hope of eternal life with God? Tell them what Christ has done for you during the past year. Give gifts to those who cannot give back. In your family gatherings, take turns expressing why Christmas is meaningful, sing Christmas hymns, and read favorite Bible verses. Help the unsaved ponder upon the meaning of the "Christmas verses."

Remember, everyone has a longing for home, for close fellowship with others and especially with our loving Father. We who know the Lord may not be home for Christmas. We continue to live and work in a dark and desperate world. But we rejoice in the hope that one day we will see God face to face and live with Him in perfect fellowship.

Christmas blessings.



— Pastor Todd
Klemme
Zion Lutheran
Wadena, Minnesota