

THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

December 18, 2001



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December 18, 2001
Volume 39, Number 16



The magazine of the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, 3110 East Medicine Lake Blvd., Minneapolis, Minnesota 55441. 763-545-5631

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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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The Lutheran Ambassador, 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd., Minneapolis, Minnesota 55441. 763-545-5631 or e-mail at luthamb@aflc.org

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

Blessings from the Basics

"I believe ... in the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints ..."

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (I Peter 2:9).

Chosen, royal, holy. These are exalted terms for describing the ordinary believer or Christian congregation. Yet, they are God's Words, and even though we may seem not to live up to them, we do well to consider them often.

To begin with, we must remember that believers have no exalted claims to make regarding their own achievements or strength. The Christian church is made up of those who know they are weak and therefore do not exalt themselves. When the Spirit of God has wrought true repentance in our heart, revealing the awful danger of our sin, and we then find refuge and rest in the merits of Christ alone, we are made continually aware of our spiritual helplessness. At the same time, we find strength beyond measure in our Savior.

It is this spirit of helplessness or weakness that gives rise to the patient understanding, which bears with the frailties and shortcomings of others. It is this constant dependence on Christ alone as our claim to righteousness and acceptance with the Father that makes sharing the gospel with others an urgent matter. It is the assurance that sin is fully atoned for by the blood of Jesus that brings forth a spirit of gratitude for the privilege of sacrificing for His sake. For example, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison, their feet fastened in stocks. "But about midnight Paul and Silas

were praying and singing hymns of praise to God" (Acts 16:25). Peter and the apostles were flogged, ordered to keep silent, so they went their way "rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41).

Here we see the power of God's grace at work in the church. With no political influence, no wealth, no physical threat but the simple knowledge that the gospel is true, the power of God is revealed through believers.

What a tremendous blessing it is to know that we are so weak, in ourselves, that we dare trust only in the Word of God and the grace He gives us through the gospel. Then the communion of saints flourishes. Calvary's love for the souls of others will prevent our giving and taking offense so quickly. The patience of true humility will allow us to set aside our personal opinions and feelings as we pray for others who bump our own sharp corners or grate against our rough edges. The devil will be frustrated and Christ glorified in the church where the members, in their weakness, lean heavily upon His strength.

When the Lord uses exalted terms to describe the Church, let us not try to live up to them in our own strength. Rather, may we be reminded that the Church is, from beginning to end, a work of His grace and in our weakness depend wholly upon His grace as we together confess "... I believe ... in the Holy Christian Church."



— **Pastor Dale A. Mellgren**
Mt. Carmel and
Trinity Lutheran
McIntosh, Minn.

A happy holiday

Christmas vacation? Or holiday? Our Canadian friends call it a holiday, while we in the United States usually call it a vacation. The late Dr. Iver Olson, dean of our Free Lutheran Seminary for many years, often remarked that the Canadians were right, but a bias toward his former home to the north was quite evident.

I've decided to side with the Canadians, too, and suggest that our choice could determine the nature of the occasion. A vacation means exactly what it says: a vacant time, a season of rest. A holiday, however, means a holy day, and it's a word filled with joyous celebration.

There's emptiness about a Christmas that is only a vacation. The world seeks to fill the vacancy with delightful stories about a jolly old saint who knows if we've been naughty or nice, a reindeer with a red nose, or a snowman who comes to life one day. Yet, all the trees, trimmings and traditions cannot satisfy an empty heart.

The reason for the season is worship. Christmas is a holiday, a holy day, a season set apart to praise God for the love that is revealed in Jesus Christ, His Son, His gift to the world. Any part of our celebration that does not point to Him is meaningless. The true Christmas Spirit is the Holy Spirit, who seeks to convict of sin and convince of grace. The fullness of Christmas is found on bended knee. The happiness of the holiday is the joy of the Lord.

Best wishes for a truly happy holiday to our AFLC family and friends!

— **Pastor Robert L. Lee**
AFLC President



2002 Lutheran Ambassador schedule

Below is the 2002 *Lutheran Ambassador* schedule. Please be in prayer for each issue. Note the deadlines and special emphasis of each issue. If you have an idea regarding a certain issue or an interest in writing, please contact the editors. Bold issues are 24 pages, others are 16 pages.

<u>Date of issue</u>	<u>Editor's Deadline</u>	<u>Issue theme</u>
January 8	December 21	Evangelism
February 5	January 18	Creation
February 26	February 8	AFLC Schools
March 19	March 1	Lent/Easter
April 9	March 22	Forgiveness
April 30	April 12	Pre-conference
May 21	May 3	Prayer
June 11	May 24	Children & Youth
July 9	June 21	Behind the scenes at church
August 6	July 19	Conference review
September 3	August 16	Sunday school
September 24	September 6	Testimonies/Outreach
October 15	September 27	Missions
November 5	October 18	Reformation
November 26	November 8	Thanksgiving/Advent
December 17	November 29	Christmas

EMMANUEL



“Daddy, over here! I’m over here!” Benjamin, my 2-year-old, loves to play hide and seek, but he cannot bear to wait the brief moments for me to find him. He does not play by the rules. When I look in the wrong places, he does not remain silent and hidden, but calls out his position to me.

Jesus also throws the rules aside in much the same way. He is the “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6), but he discards the aloofness that these positions and attributes might afford him. In contrast to an earthly human prince who secures himself behind barriers of bureaucrats who do his bidding, announce his presence, and ensure his photo-op audiences, this divine, sovereign Prince emerges and unashamedly calls out, “Here I am, here I am!” even to those who are not looking for him (Isaiah 65:1). Isaiah 55:6 tells us that God is near, and that He delights in being found.

God announces he is near, but often life experiences cause us to cry out, demanding that He explain his apparent absence in the midst of our suffering. The prophet cried out, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:1). This cry is certainly one of desperation, but, perhaps, also one of faith. It would be ludicrous for someone to cry out to a God who was distant and remote. Why should a Prince of eternal royal deity descend to walk the earthen roads with broken humanity?

President Thomas Jefferson decided that God was the Creator of the world, but not the Savior or miraculous intervener. While in the

GOD WITH US

White House, Jefferson, according to his account, spent a number of evenings in February of 1804 going through the Gospels with a razor and cutting out all accounts recording God's intimate hand in peoples lives. Miracles and references of Jesus' deity were removed. A God who was near, personal and desiring of intimacy was more than could be hoped for, and certainly more than what was deemed acceptable from the Prince of Deity. Jefferson is not alone, for there is no religion or worship in the world (other than one) that even pretends to offer a god who is "with" us in a meaningful way.

The exception is Christianity. Jesus Christ stands alone as the "God with skin on" who did "rend the heavens and come down," as the ancient prophet had prayed, and as millions of others have also cried out. The Everlasting Father has always been with His creation from before the beginning of time. Yet, now, He comes near in a transformational, new way. In the incarnation, Christ comes in all His deity, and He takes on human flesh. He becomes the God-man and walks among us. He is not silent or hidden, but comes to us and calls out to all. Jesus wants to be found so desperately that he places Himself in our midst.

For the Mighty Prince to be with us, He wills Himself to breathe our air, wear our shoes, endure our physical limitations, carry our sorrows, be acquainted with

our grief, bear our sins, carry our cross, die our death and be resurrected, foreshadowing our future. In a world of pain and suffering, I have little desire for a god who is remote, silent and self-protecting. I could never worship a god, if it were not for the cross. Thousands of gods fill the pantheons of paganism, but I have turned away, and

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in the words of John Stott, "I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! ... He entered into our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. ... There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering."

The incarnation is the fullest expression of Emmanuel, "God with us." Colossians 2:9, in celebration, proclaims that "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." Christ came as a child of one of us (Mary) in order to be crucified as the Savior of all of us.

Emmanuel, God with us. You came near to us, and you draw us near to you. We worship you.

— *Pastor Steve Carlson*
Dalton Free Lutheran
Dalton, Minn.





His

REIGN

Will never end

Isaiah is excited. He is finally going to give the people of God some good news! How discouraging it must have been for Isaiah to bring the news of captivity to the people. There was so much bad news. Babylonia would destroy Jerusalem. Things were a real mess. The Word of God had been laid aside. It was no longer followed. This, of course, means that the people had lost out on their relationship with the Lord.

Any nation that does not follow the Lord, that is not following His Word, will not prosper. Any individual who is not in the Word of God will not prosper. It cannot be done.

Trying to find answers, the people consulted with mediums and wizards. They were looking for answers from those, Isaiah says, who chirp and mutter. They also consulted the dead to find answers. "Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness" (Isaiah 8:19-22).

They looked for answers in all the wrong places. In the process, they cursed God. They acted as if God and His Word did not exist. In doing this, all they would see would be distress. There would be only fearful doom. There would be nothing but darkness. The prognosis was to be "snared and captured."

Isaiah continually urged the people to wait for the Lord. His witness was: "I will put my trust in Him." The people needed to hear this witness. If they did not hear it and heed it, the situation would remain the same. Assyria would continue to be the Lord's instrument. Kings like Ahaz and Manasseh would continue their hold on the people and keep them in captivity.

Still, despite the situation Isaiah ministered in, the Lord was present. He had not forgotten His people. Even though they had sinned and even though they had neglected the Lord and His Word, He gave Isaiah the green light, so to speak, offering them hope. The real Prince of Peace was coming. In the midst of the distress, Isaiah preached the law. The people had to come under conviction of their sins. And in the midst of the judgment, the Lord was present. He continued to offer His promises to them. He preached the good news of the gospel.


In Isaiah 9:6-7, an excited prophet is able to give them hope. There would be light in the midst of the darkness. They would see joy and certain happiness. There would be rejoicing, like in the harvest when the crop is taken into the barn. The Lord would save them out of their troubles. The yolk of captivity and slavery would be broken. He did not let Israel and Judah down, and He will not let us down. There is hope in the presence of Jesus Christ!

How was this to all come about? Through a child, a newborn infant.

He is a gift to us. "Unto us a Son is given" (Isaiah 9:6). God's Son, begotten and not made. God in the flesh. He came by special birth to those of us who want to be His. He is our ruler. The government will be upon His shoulders. This was the Word of God Isaiah was waiting to hear. He was excited because he was privileged to proclaim it. When Jesus rules and His people read and heed His eternal word, the darkness of this life gives in to Him.

What is needed is the realization that Jesus is in control. His government is forever. He is the eternal Prince of Peace. He is able to save to the uttermost because He came just as Isaiah prophesied. Look up for there is hope in Jesus.

If we focus on the world instead of Jesus, if we forget His Word and act as if the Lord and His Word do not exist, we will have the emptiness the world has. If we focus on Jesus and the Word, we will see as Isaiah did, that we have a wonderful Savior, the Prince of Peace, the author and finisher of our faith. Now that makes us excited.

— **Pastor Dennis Gray** 
Newfolden, Minn.

Humble Prince



As I watched “The Triumph” on stage in Branson, Mo., and its portrayal of the resurrection of Jesus, I quivered as sound effects and lightning portrayed a supernatural power. Yet, in my mind’s eye, I knew there was more than lights and sound that day. And I ask, “If it took great power to raise Jesus, what did it take to send Him to earth?”

Scripture gives us little insight into what it was like for Jesus to leave His heavenly home to come to Earth. How was the Creator of the world transformed and carried in the womb of a young woman? Was He silenced and cut off from communication from His Father for nine months? And why did God choose a stable for the setting of that most unusual event?

Several crèches I own, from different areas of the world, are precious to me. I consider them the most important part of my Christmas decorations. They remind me of the coming of Christ to earth — the reason for Christmas. Our sons used to delight in adding the various pieces each week of Advent. The last were the magi.

The magi asked, “Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?” Jesus was born King. While we acknowledge the baby in the manger, born to Joseph and Mary, we read, “Splendor and majesty are before Him” (Psalm 96:6). Isaiah said the government rests on His shoulders, Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings. All authority was given to Him — no one really knew Him except His Father, and no one knows His Father except through Jesus.

Rarely was He seen as King. The crowd at the Feast of the Passover called out, “Blessed is the King of Israel.” Scripture says that only after Jesus was glorified did even His disciples realize that what happened that day was written about Him long before. Pilate called Him King of the Jews but the sign he had fastened to the cross brought little reverence. When Pilate asked Jesus if He was a king, there was little or no understanding of Jesus’ response, “You are right in saying I am a King.” To this ruler, who understood so little, Jesus explained, “For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to Me” (John 19:37).

Recently, the Duke of York, his royal majesty Prince Andrew, visited the school three of our granddaughters attend in the country of Oman. It was an exciting event. The choir sang. Rachel’s kindergarten class did a march and sang a song. Alison, a third-grader, wrote us, “Grades five to third got to go and wave goodbye to him.” Then he was gone. It’s doubtful he’ll ever touch her life again, but she will long tell others, “I saw him, once.” Royalty draws attention to itself by brief visits.

What a contrast is the visit of the King of kings. Paul writes, “Who being in very nature God, did not

consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance of a man He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8).

Jesus, the King of kings, gave up privilege to become a man. There was no gold or glitter, only straw in a manger. He sought no pomp or power or privilege, except to serve God, His Father on earth as He was in Heaven. No fences protected Him from peering crowds. He became a man, mingling with sinners and the sick. He looked for those who needed Him most. He touched the untouchable, even with His spittle.

Norwegian theologian Ole Hallesby writes, “He asked for nothing else but the privilege of serving, of imparting His happiness to every heart and home.

But the race did not recognize Him. It demanded proof. But He could give only one proof, the proof of love — love unto death! The death of the cross. By His death, atonement was made for our sin. That now God could again reach His Father’s children with His love.”

I confess I rather like the confines of my home. I am comfortable here. When God asks me to leave it to go serve in some way, even to call upon a neighbor I do not know, I am sometimes reluctant. I need often to be reminded through His Word, that God

offers me the privilege of serving Him. Obedience brings joy. A loyal subject brings honor to her King. When I do leave my home, I am eager to get back. I wonder, was Jesus eager to get home? Did he want to leave the turmoil and pain? Did He long for close company with His Father?

Jesus did another remarkable thing — He promised us His Holy Spirit, so His presence still moves on Earth. Now we “see” Him in a different way, but He is here. Royalty wants to be present in my home and yours this Christmas.

— Delores Berkas
Wallace, S.D.



**“... but made
Himself nothing,
taking the very
nature of a
servant, being
made in human
likeness. And
being found in
appearance of a
man, He humbled
Himself ...”**

He is Lord OVER ALL

Prince of Peace. It's not just poetry to me. Not Christmas carol language. Not a figure of speech. The Prince of Peace is who Jesus is. I celebrate Christmas because I believe Jesus is the Prince. Jesus Christ — King of all. Heir to the throne. Master of you. I really believe it.

In a tiny village in Israel, not far from Jerusalem, Jesus the Christ was born to a Jewish woman, a young adult named Mary and her husband, Joseph, sometime between 6 B.C and 1 A.D. He grew to 33 years of age. He died on a cross outside the city limits of Jerusalem. And three days later, he rose again, talked to people on a road, cooked breakfast, ate fish and appeared before at least 500 people. I believe He is alive, still breathing, still watching, still Prince of all, not a former leader, not dead and gone, not going to die, never going to die, actually. And this same Jesus is Prince over you — and He is going to return to Earth the same way He ascended from Earth, as described in Acts 1, in the body, in the flesh. You can look it up yourself.

It's the truth, and it doesn't matter what everybody else says. He's not an option. Not one among many for Muslims and Buddhists. Not a possible path for people who pursue tolerance. Jesus is Lord. He is coming back. He will claim His people and establish His kingdom. Franklin Graham was right. He said, "The God of Islam is not the same God." When asked about Jesus, Mr. Graham said that the Savior is Prince of all, "He's not the son of God of the Christian or Judeo-Christian faith." Mr. Graham told NBC that Jesus is not on par with the God of Islam. It's not syntax. It's not the dynamic equivalent. In wake of world events, and with an eye to keep peace, Mr. Graham was asked if the God of Islam is the same as the Son of God. "It's a different God," he told them. When NBC gave him the chance to retract those words, he said no.

And so I smile when I hear the news reports. Jesus is not politically correct, the pundits say. And I agree. He's fighting words. They say He is an intolerant option. Not to be tolerated. Prince for some. Not for all.

But that's not what God says. He is Prince of Peace. For every one. The one way, the one truth, the one life. He's not an option.

And you don't vote on truth and consider public

polls. You don't vote on reality. People have been counting and recounting the tally on Jesus' Lordship for centuries. It doesn't matter. He's in. He won the world by dying on the cross. He won Florida and He won the Northeast. He won Africa and He won the world. He won Jalalabad, Afghanistan, and Kabul, and New York City. He won salvation with the blood of the cross, and He doesn't care what the Electoral College tally is. He's King of Creation. He's Prince of Peace. He's Incumbent for Eternity, and His is the only vote that really counts.

I still believe John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." That's what it says. God loved the world. God loves you. And He gave His one and only Son to die, a Prince for the paupers. This Jesus wants you. He's not a baby anymore, but a real-live Savior. He's holding out His arms, saying, come.

Come. Come like the carol, "O Little Town Of Bethlehem," says. "Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today."

Jesus is our peace. He remains. He still stands. You can't hijack Him, you can't poison him, can't topple him with a jet, can't terrorize Him. He is staying right here. He doesn't hide in caves. He isn't afraid of bombs. You don't chase Him to the highlands. You don't alter his position. Public pressure doesn't affect Him. Political prowess doesn't intimidate Him. That's exactly what Ephesians 2:14 means. "He Himself is our peace," it says. Jesus, the Prince, has "made both groups into one." He "broke down the barrier of the dividing wall" at the cross. And He is waiting for you to come to peace with Him. If there are meek souls here, who will receive Him still, the dear Christ will enter in. You can be saved. You can stand. And you can grow. If your soul is meek, and you need forgiveness anew, then say, "yes," to Jesus Christ. He has said yes to you. Will you say, "Yes, I want to walk as a child of the light, I want to follow Jesus?"

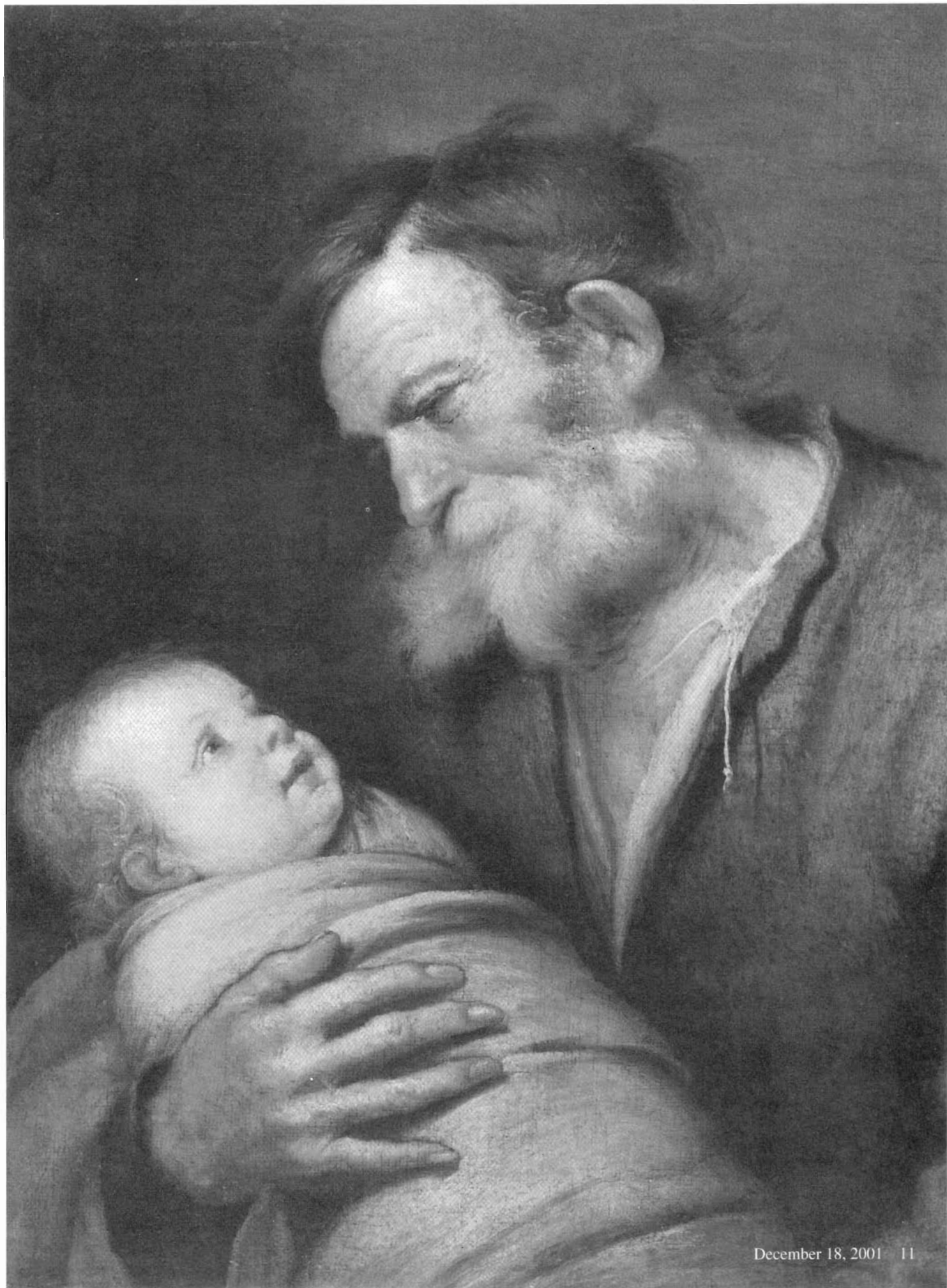
Jesus has followed you. And He wants to make peace with you. Invite Him to come, and be born anew.

And follow Him as the Prince of Peace for all.

— **Pastor James L. Johnson**

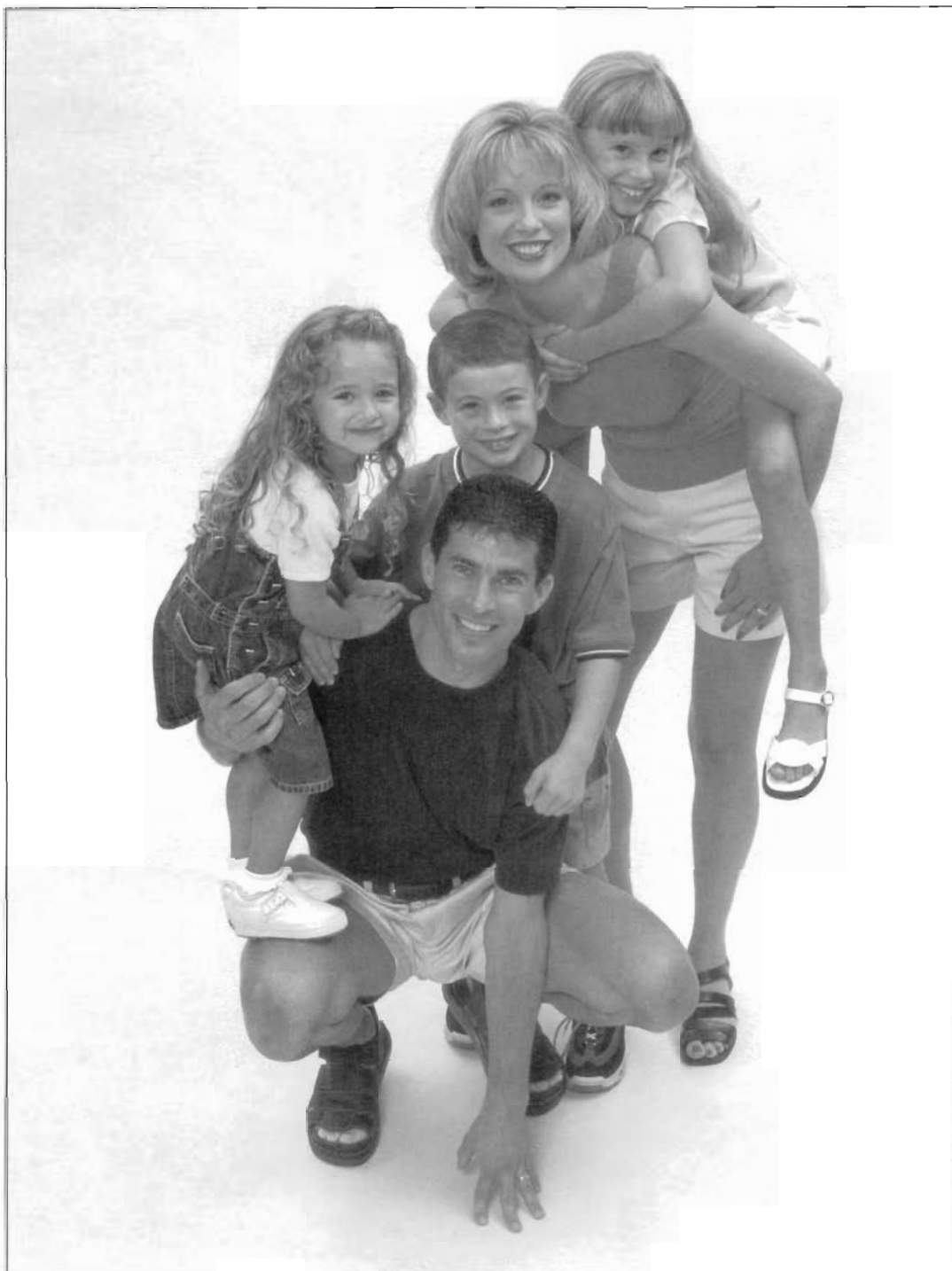
Dean, AFLBS





Live in Peace

**This holiday,
see how you
can share
the Prince of
Peace with
your family.**



God has given us amazing gifts in our lives. I think you would agree that His grace and mercy has to be His greatest gift. Coming from a very dark past, I have come to see the most beautiful part of His grace ... His love.

I can remember my childhood like it was yesterday. One day sticks out. I was probably about 9 and it was a Sunday morning. My parents woke my brother and I up to get ready for church. As we brushed our teeth we could hear the heated discussion coming from the kitchen, which would soon

grow into an argument. This wasn't the first time it happened; my brother and I knew the routine all too well. They would argue about how there wasn't any orange juice left or the bills, just about anything. Then on the car ride to church, my parents would continue their "discussion," all the way up until we got to church, and at that time, two gigantic smiles graced my parents' faces. It was as if nothing was going on. They held each other's hands and seemed like a totally happy couple with nothing to hide.

As a child, I couldn't understand this. How could a couple believe in "the Prince of Peace" and be hid-

"Peace I leave

with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you."

— John 14:27

ing such warfare in His very house? I viewed my parents as hypocrites and Christians as people who simply went to church on Sunday and put on their masks so they could at least feel good about themselves. I started believing what a lot of the world believes about Christians ... that it is just a crutch, something to lean on in a hurtful life. As I got older, my view of the Christian life remained tainted and my heart was hardened every week I was forced to

go to church. I never, ever imagined or thought it could be at all possible that I would go down that same road in life. "Why would I want to be a two-faced Christian?" I asked myself.

Now I'm a strong, Bible-believing Christian at a school that digs deep into the Word of God. Now I understand why I had that perception of Christians. They can come off that way if they are not open with their faith or if the person who sees them does not know what Scripture says about believers. Christians are not perfect, they're not even close to perfect; it is the fact that they recognize this that causes them to turn into who they are. I now know it is the One in them who is perfect, and who is doing His work through them despite their flaws. My siblings, however, did not all take the road of life as I did. My brother's heart was actually hardened like Pharaoh's in the story of the Exodus. Now he has come to the place where he openly denies Christ and has promised that he will never accept Him as his Savior (1 Corinthians 1:18).

My parents have grown in their faith. Instead of being merely churchgoers, they are now two people who attend Bible studies, who are part of discussion on the church board, and teach Sunday school as well. But out of all these things, the most noticeable is how almost every evening or afternoon, they can

be found sitting at home, eyes deeply planted in the Word of God.

I go home on the weekends every once in a while, to do laundry or sometimes just to be with my family (not as often as I would like). When I'm home, I enjoy a fellowship that surpasses any other that I have found, with the two people who know me the most, who I can talk about anything with. I find that our conversations either include the Word of

God or pertain to something in our life that follows it.

My sister, still in high school, is the only one left at home. So the only time we seem to get everyone together is during the holidays and birthdays. We all get along so well that family friends and extended relatives compliment my parents on our behavior. However, there are times when we are together and the past part of our lives starts to get tangled in. My step-dad usually says something about Scripture or a godly moral pertaining to a situation. It is then that the air tenses and my brother starts going. I have spent hours talking with him and my family about Christ, only coming to the point that he gets mad at us, thinking that we are condemning him. We understand that he is extremely hard in the

heart and now know that there are only two things we can really do to help him: to pray, which is a given, but then to love him like Christ loves us (John 13:34-35). This love is an unspoken truth that my family (at least the believing side) has been following, and our lives as a family have been changed because of it.

— *Jesse Kneeland*
AFLBS senior
Corcoran, Minn.



Fear not, little flock

He brings you peace

In times of fear, just how can we share the peace of God? There are two scripture passages that immediately come to mind. The first is from the third chapter of Genesis. The second comes from the second chapter of Luke.

Fear is introduced for the first time in the Bible in Genesis chapter three. When our first parents sinned in the Garden of Eden, several things took place. Genesis 3:7-10 says their eyes were opened,



they saw that they were naked, and for the first time since their creation, they experienced fear. This fear, as we see in I John 4:18, had to do with judgment. They hid from God. No longer would Adam and Eve meet Him in the coolness of the evening to share in a fellowship unmarked by sin. No longer were they innocent.

Fear established a foothold that remains present within every human heart. It ranks as one of the most powerful of all human emotions. And God knew how significant a tool fear would be in the enemy's arsenal.

Isaiah 41:10 is an example among many other scripture passages of God's caring and His compassion toward those who fear. He says, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." This theme is woven throughout the Old Testament, pointing to the promise of a Savior. For just as sin ushered fear into the world, the Savior would dispel its power.

In the second scripture passage, Luke 2:8-14, the shepherds living in the fields and tending their flocks at night are visited by an angel. Luke puts it bluntly, "... and they were terrified." The angel replied, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good tidings 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." God's antidote to fear is the Savior. He is the peace-giver. He quiets the troubled heart and provides what is needed.

I wear a few different hats in the work God has called me to. I am a hospice chaplain and bereavement coordinator. I also oversee the stress management for our division. I can tell you that it seems that fear has come out of the woodwork since September 11. Many describe their feelings of fear (ranging from anxiety to panic, even terror) as having taken their emotional reserves.

As a hospice chaplain, I serve a congregation of dying people. I pray often with most of them. I have found it helpful to pray something like this, "Lord Jesus, you have not promised us that we would live a life free of heartaches and disappointments. You haven't promised a life free of illness, and struggles of many kinds. But you have promised to give us peace. You have promised never to leave us or forsake us. And, in the midst of all of life's problems, you have promised us peace."

I tell them of my own fears. And, I speak of my peace. It's all about my Savior. The most effective way I have found to share peace with the fearful has been to concentrate on what God promises, seasoning what is said with the Word. Every promise of peace in Scripture carries with it the power to impart and sustain that peace. I sing for almost all of my patients, and find they enjoy old hymns of hope and promise.

I will leave it to your imagination to design ways to reach out to those around you struggling with fear. Concentrate on what God promises. Share the Christmas story. Invite a neighbor in and read it together. Speak honestly of your fears (and you do have them) and of the difference Jesus is making for you. And, trust that God will bless your efforts in sowing the seeds of peace in hearts filled with fear.

May God bless us all this Christmas in our opportunities to live out to others the peace He has placed within our hearts.

— **Pastor John Rieth**
Grand Forks, N.D.



A Christmas remembered

In 1992, the Soviet Union would have celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. It was an era of unprecedented cruelty and the restriction of freedom for many ethnic groups throughout Central and Eastern Europe, including the freedom to worship God. The communists, who were responsible for these atrocities, used oppressive and harsh methods to enforce their dominance. Among the dogmas of Soviet communism was atheism: the belief that there is no God. Churches were closed, many pastors were killed or deported to Siberia and believers were persecuted for their faith.

The people of the tiny Baltic state of Latvia in Eastern Europe were among the millions under the oppression of Soviet communism who were fed the lie of atheism. These stoic, resilient people were given the command to denounce their faith or suffer the consequences. Yet, they were people for whom faith in God had always been vital.

The nation of Latvia is famous for "song festivals," which began in 1873. During these festivals, the people gather by the thousands to sing their traditional folk songs and hymns so dear to their hearts. These festivals became an avenue through which the people could express their faith and trust in God publicly, even during the Soviet years. In 1991, the song festival became known as the "singing revolution." This was the year that Latvia regained its freedom after so many years of bloodshed and loss of life.

It was to this beautiful little city that we came as a family in the fall of 1993 when my husband took a year of sabbatical leave from our seminary. We came with a burden for souls and an eagerness to share the gospel. However, we also came tainted with the influence of American materialism.

As the Christmas season drew near, the commercialism we were so accustomed to was nowhere in evidence. It had always seemed an important part of Christmas preparation to buy an evergreen tree to decorate and to purchase special gifts for each other. However, trees were not to be found and the stores did not feature any special holiday items. A couple of days before Christmas, we finally found a small tree for sale in the open market in downtown Riga.

The real joy of that Christmas Eve in Latvia, however, was to worship and fellowship with other believers in a church not far from our home, a church that had been closed for 50 years until independence came. We sat on pews that had been secretly stored in the loft of a farmer's barn. They had been removed in the dark of the night years ago in order to protect them from being destroyed.

The singing of the Christmas story in this little

church was the highlight of the service. The church was very cold with no means of heat, but the radiant joy on the faces of the children and the adults filled our hearts with the warmth of God's love.

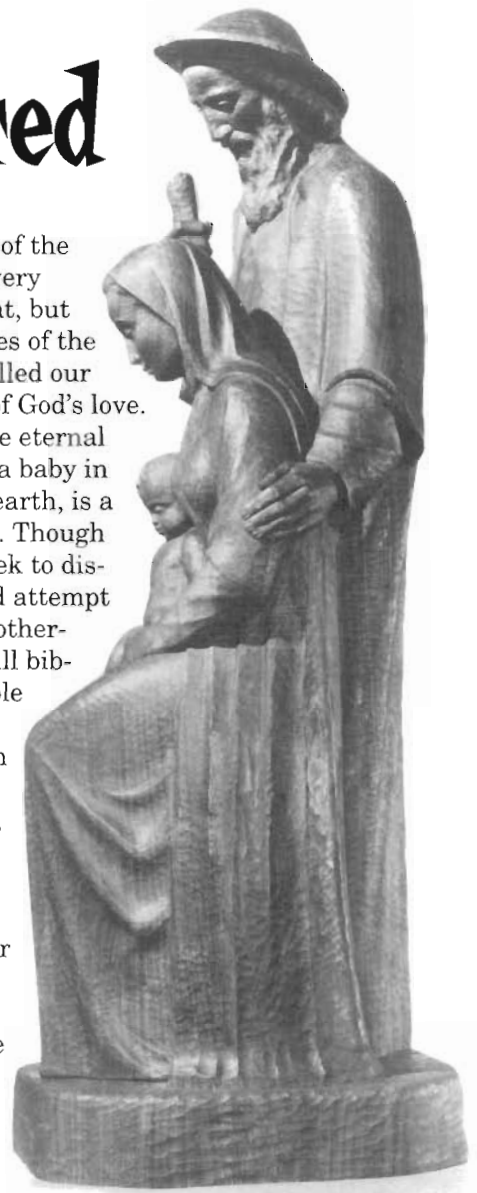
The birth of Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who came as a baby in Bethlehem to this sinful earth, is a central truth of Scripture. Though human ideologies may seek to discredit God's existence and attempt to force people to believe otherwise, this truth, as with all biblical truth, is unchangeable and absolute.

As we worshiped with the precious Latvian believers that Christmas, the simple but awesome reality of the baby of Bethlehem as the One who came to be the Savior of a lost and dying world gripped our hearts. We bowed our heads with the renewed, prayerful purpose to live in surrender to Him. Truly, this hope and trust in Him was the "anchor for our souls"

(Hebrews 9:16) as it was for those around us in that wonderful Christmas service. Their lives bore witness of an anchor in Christ that is sure and steadfast amidst the storms of life, however severe and sustained they may have been.

Many believers in Eastern Europe told us it was their *babushka* (grandmother) who spoke to them of Jesus and led them to faith in Him. As these elderly saints prayed and passed on the gospel message to their children and grandchildren secretly in their homes, there came a rich harvest of souls in the oppressed land of Latvia. Christmas of 1993 gave us a special opportunity to see and to hear some of that harvest in the faces and voices of the little congregation gathered to worship their dear Savior. What a joy to witness God's gracious and powerful work in preserving and expanding His Church through difficult times! Our Lord's promise is true: "I will build My Church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18).

— Ellen Monseth
Medicine Lake Lutheran
Plymouth, Minn.



THE LITTLE ONES

Sharing His peace with them

How do we share peace with our children? This is a question we have been hearing all over the news since September 11. As Christians, how should we be responding to that question? Is the answer for Christians different than it is for the world?

Last night I woke up to my daughter, Hannah, crying by my bed. She was scared of the monsters and spiders in her room. This was the third night that she had woken up very scared. At 2:30 in the morning, I am not at my best, and it took me awhile to remember that just saying, "There are no spiders or monsters in your bed," was not going to comfort my daughter.

My older two children have both gone through these bouts with bad dreams, and we have tried a variety of ways to overcome their fears. I want them to get over their fear so that I can sleep at night, but also so that they grow up strong and confident in whatever situation they find themselves. How do we help our children to know peace when there is so much that is scary all around us?

As believers, our answers come from the Bible: what God has to say to us. I think the first thing we need to understand is that peace is a gift from God. Numbers 6:24-26 says, "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace." The peace that is referred to is not an absence of war, but a state of rightness and well-being. Such peace comes only from the Lord. Peace, as all gifts from God, is a gift that is ours with salvation. Isaiah 26:3-4 says, "You will keep in perfect



peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the LORD forever, For the LORD, The LORD, is the Rock eternal."

Christ makes it possible for us to have peace. In John 16:33, Jesus says, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart. I have overcome the world."

Christ conquered the biggest fear we could have: death. Psalm 27:1 says, "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?" As we understand who God is and what Christ has done for us, there should not be anything for us to fear.

As sinners it is a struggle for us to trust in what is said in these verses and not be afraid. We like to be in control and know what is going to happen and when it will happen. We like to be able to conquer our fears by ourselves or else just avoid them. How can we share peace with our children when we do not always have it ourselves? Just like any other sin, we confess it and bring it

to Jesus.

Psalm 55:22 tells us, "Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall." When we see things like buildings falling, destruction and death, our first response should be to turn to Christ. If our children are frightened, the first thing we should do is point them to Christ. Look at His Word and pray with them. We share peace with our children by teaching them about their Savior and showing them how to give their fears to Jesus. Paul tells us in Philippians 4:7, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your

requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Our children learn by watching us and by being taught. We need to make sure they know the God we pray to is the God of all gods and not some generic god they hear about on TV. We also need to show them by our example and teach them that they can take all of their fears to Christ.

When my daughter woke up scared last night, we comforted her with Psalm 91:11, "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways." We prayed with her and sent her back to her bed. She woke up the next morning and told us that the angels had kept her safe. I do not know what she really understands, but I do know that she is learning to turn to God to find peace, peace that "transcends all understanding."

— Kristin Peterson
Calvary Free Lutheran
Arlington, S.D.

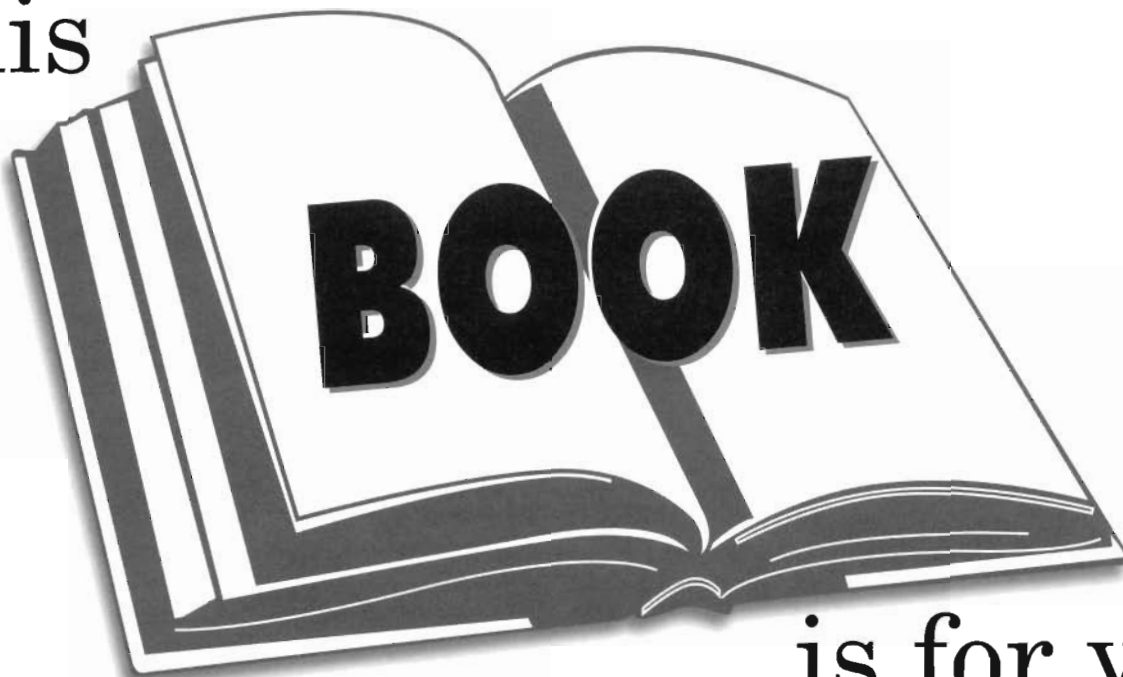


For unto us a child is
born, unto us a son is
given: and the government
shall be upon his shoulder:
and his name shall be called
Wonderful, Counselor, The
mighty God, The everlasting
Father, The Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6



This



is for you

In a recent survey, AFLC pastors and lay people alike were asked to recommend books they have recently read and share what they learned from the books. Here is a sampling of some surveys.

The book I read was *America at the Threshold of Destiny*, subtitled *Replacing Hopelessness and Fear with Faith for America's Future*, by Francis Frungipane. I strongly recommend this for everyone who struggles with balancing judgment with the gospel message. It has a wonderful description of the Trinity's inner workings and gives a very motivating call for intercessory prayer from the standpoint of mercy. In the wake of the national disaster of Sept. 11, it is a timely aid for those who exhort or teach people or comfort mourners at this time in the U.S.A.

Pastor Doug Wagley
New Vision Free Lutheran
Spokane, Wash.

With One Accord in One Place by Armin Gesswein is a tremendous book on the New Testament congregation, prayer and revival. It fits so well with our AFLC perspective on the congregation. I learned that God

can do great things through a congregation of 120 people committed to prayer.

This little book is a great study of the first Christian congregation, as recorded in the book of Acts. Gesswein very simply and directly points out the vital necessity of personal and corporate prayer in the life of that congregation and all congregations. The book has been used of the Lord to revitalize my focus in congregational ministry.

Pastor Lloyd Quanbeck
Bethel Free Lutheran
Minot, N.D.

The Prayer of Jabez, by Bruce Wilkinson showed me how to be open to asking for expanded blessing and to be utilized by the Lord in new ways.

Anonymous

Child Called "It": One Child's Courage to Survive, The Lost Boy: A Foster Child's Search for the Love of

a Family, A Man Named Dave: A Story of Triumph and Forgiveness. all by Dave Pelzer.

Even in his helpless situation, "the Spirit" would not let him give up. I learned to count my own blessings in my childhood and in my child-rearing years.

Cherry Urwiler
United Lutheran
Laurel, Neb.

Thy Kingdom Come devotional book by Ludvig Hope. We use it as our morning devotional time together. It is excellent.

Anonymous

The Puzzle of Ancient Man: Advanced technology in past civilizations, by Donald Chittick.

Chittick documents the recurring theme in artifacts that ancient man was very advanced, which is the opposite of what we are generally told. Ancient man had very accurate maps of polar areas before they



were covered with ice, built structures of stone with a skill that we are only approaching today, moved building stones larger than we could move with our current largest equipment, had calendars more accurate than the one we currently use, etc. It is a great book to start thinking about early biblical history and make it fit into our worldview.

The Wedge of Truth: Splitting the Foundations of Naturalism, by Phillip Johnson.

This is a good book for those who wish to understand the key issues in the evolution debate. It should make

you think. Creation is the only answer, but it is hard to get the key issues on the table for debate because of the fervor of the anti-God forces.

Icons of Evolution: Science or Myth?, by Jonathan Wells.

The author, with extensive references, clearly documents that the 10 most commonly used examples to support evolution are false or misleading. While this is commonly known in biological circles, these examples continue to appear in textbooks all the way to graduate texts. A carefully worded amendment that passed the Senate 91 to 8 reads that

schools should teach students "to distinguish the data or testable theories of science from philosophical or religious claims that are made in the name of science." The National Association of Biology Teachers is opposing this amendment in the House and Senate conference committees, thereby admitting they are teaching their philosophy and not science.

The Deadliest Monster: A Christian Introduction to Worldviews, by J. F. Baldwin.

An excellent book for Sunday school teachers, youth pastors, Christian educators and home-schoolers explaining and contrasting the implications of the Christian worldview with that of all religions. We need to do more to recognize how the culture's worldview may have influence on our own.

The Greatest Among You: A Student's Guild to Servant Leadership, by Randy Sims.

The book is designed to equip the next generation to be leaders. Sims asks: "What does it mean to lead? Who does Christ expect to lead? When does leadership matter?" The book is for every Christian student committed to represent Christ well in difficult times.

How to Stay Christian in College: An Interactive Guide to Keeping the Faith, by J. Budziszewski.

This text gives prospective college students a glimpse of what they will encounter on most college campuses and advice on how to hold true to one's values and convictions. While not mentioned in the book, current polls indicate that about 70 percent of Christian youths lose their faith while in college. This book is a must for students at that point in their lives. It covers topics from conflicting worldviews to classroom harassment, from the myths of science, politics and sex to focusing on the true meaning of life.

Rob Kohl, Brookings, S.D.



Christmas revival

God used Hauge to bring a much-needed awakening to Norway while the country was under Danish rule.

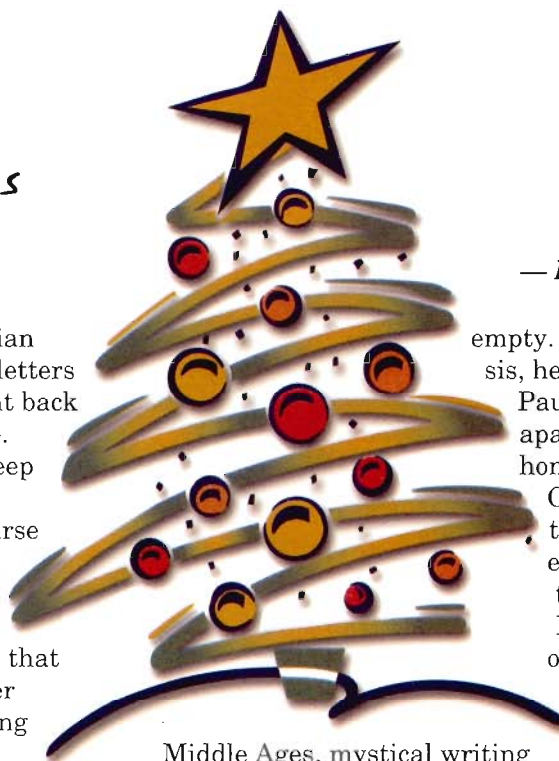
Hans Nielson Hauge was a Christian man who loved his home. In his letters and writings, he continually went back in memory to his home at Hauge. His parents spoke of him with deep love and thankfulness. And it was Father and Mother who had called him away from the coarse work environment he had gotten into in 1795 as a butcher's helper in Fredikstad. His parents felt that their appeal to him to come home was a rescue action. They couldn't know that their son, the restless Hans, some months later would be overwhelmed by a spiritual awakening that changed both his life and the history of Norway.

The day was April 5, 1796. It happened while he was in spiritual sadness and was singing as he plowed the earth of the Hauge farm. It was on that day that the first Haugean fellowship was created. His two sisters came to the joy of assurance that same evening. Later, the other siblings came. The years came and the years passed, but the family at Hauge was in God's hands. Even in the inhuman years of imprisonment, God's mercy shone over both the prisoner and his dear ones back home.

And so it happened that Hauge's life in strange ways came to experience great events in many a Christmastime. It was as if the prophet from Tune parish and the festival of Christmas had a rendezvous. Therefore, we will lay forth a report about some of the Christmas observances we know about from the gripping life story of Hauge.

1797

This year had been filled with fear, doubt and soul-searching. After the life-changing, rapturous year of 1796, Hauge himself thought that he had lost something in his spiritual life. He didn't feel the same joy in witnessing as before. The Word also had become dry and



— Dr. Sverre Norborg

empty. In a deep personal crisis, he had decided to follow Paul's example and stand apart from marriage and home life. The Lord Jesus Christ had also talked of those who chose to be eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. In the midst of this period of spiritual weariness, deliverance and renewal came through a late

Middle Ages, mystical writing from the circle of God's friends. As Martin Luther, Hauge also received evangelical help from the "Tauler" book (Johannes Tauler, 1300-1361).

Everything had again become new. The need to work and the joy of preaching returned. Christmas was celebrated with family and among believing people. On the third day of Christmas (December 27), He was standing in the middle of a Bible talk at the home of one of his relatives in Glemmen, when the gathering was broken up by the pastor of Frederikstad, Gottlieb Feiermann. Hauge had broken the Conventicle Act of Jan. 13, 1741, which forbade unofficial revival meetings.

It led to arrest. There, in prison, Hauge sang and witnessed to the prisoners. Some of them wept. That was the first imprisonment for Hauge.

1799

In August, Hauge came to Trondjem, where he hoped to get four of his newer booklets reprinted. He had received a travel pass from the sympathetic city president Anton de Fine, and was welcomed by book publisher W. Stephensen, who also agreed to print the first edition of Hauge's hymnbook. While the work was being done, Hauge took part in a mighty awakening,

which transformed the life of the people in Meldalen. Again, the authorities acted, this time it was the bishop and county sheriff. During an eventful week, Dec. 16-23, a charge was brought forth based on an enactment of 1754 concerning vagrancy.

On the day before Christmas Eve, the hearing was held in the courtroom at Skjetlin against Hauge and his co-worker, Lars Olsen Hemstad. Thirty-six witnesses were heard. They offered nothing but defense for Hauge and the awakening. Christmas was at the door, so the district judge continued the hearing until late in the evening. Out in the night, the arrested were taken back to the city hall jail at Kongensgate 2 in Trondjem.

It was that Christmas Eve that Hans Nielson Hauge gave us the Christmas song that we have appreciated so much. In its original form, the Hauge song went this way:

I belong to God by grace,
How can the world harm me?
Only let the great peril
Rush in with its deceit

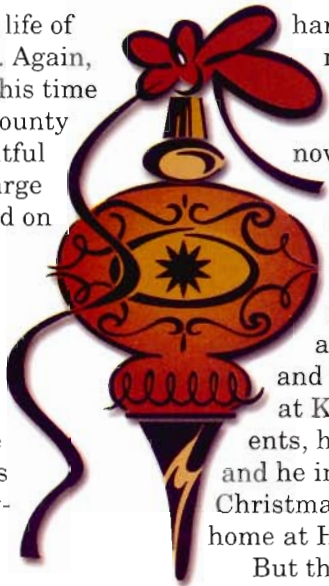
And my body be bound
In the deepest cave,
Yet shall the Spirit triumph
And celebrate joyous Christmas.

God's grace thereto strengthens
And mightily stands us by;
So that we can rightly worship
And follow truth's way.

That we now all the days
Can with united mind
Wholly renounce ourselves,
In heaven enter in.
(Freely translated, 1804)

1804

Hauge took a tear-filled farewell of his friends in Bergen on Christmas. Those days in the Hanseatic town had been filled with



hard work and great harassment from the creditors. Hauge never came back. In his boat Endeavor, he now sailed south to the Kristiansand publisher with new manuscripts. After that, his course led to Jylland, where he had a flock of believing friends awaiting him. In a friendly and thankful letter from Eeg at Kristiansand to his parents, he told them all was well and he intended to celebrate Christmas at home at Hauge.

But that didn't happen. In late October, he was arrested by his old enemy, Sheriff Jens Gram, at Eiker. The night of Nov. 23, he was placed in irons and driven to the city hall jail at Christiania (Oslo). The order came from the royal Danish government office, which was led by Hauge's most dangerous enemy, the fanatical president, Frederick Julius Kaas. And so it happened that Norway's most important champion of the common people, the leader of spiritual awakening from Tune, observed Christmas among drunkards in a stinking dungeon. Through visits and secret letters, it became a Christmas he never forgot. It was now five years since he had written his Christmas song in Trondjem. This time he sat in anxiety about what Copenhagen had in mind.

Christmas Eves 1805 and 1806 were much worse, with broken health and doubting hopelessness.

1809

This was the strangest year, where he was paroled in order to build a salt plant along the Norwegian coast from Lillesand to Svanoe in Sondfjord. He went under loan from the authorities and received a renewal of health through his country, Norway. The letters from that year bear such a delightful impression. To be sure, he was suddenly called back to legal obligations and



arrest, but the highest Norwegian authorities had eventually become tired of Copenhagen's inhuman handling of an outstanding Norwegian citizen, who really was nothing but a prisoner still being investigated. Thus Hauge got a free pass to celebrate the Christmas festival season at home on his father's farm in Rolven. It was a strangely rich Christmas reunion. Father, Mother and his sisters at home saw that Hans was now a man whose health was endangered. But his spirit wasn't broken and the certainty of his innocence shone through what he could tell about the jail and the legal procedure.

His faith had held even through the coal black anxieties of 1805-06. In looking back, Hauge said, "This faith is of all my most important



thing, has been and is my greatest comfort in all my affliction, for this faith brings the peace Jesus promises His own ...”

After New Year's 1810, he traveled back to Christiania. It was a strange leave-taking for Hauge as he departed. It was the last time he saw his parents. They didn't live to see their son's legal acquittal in 1814.

1814

The day before Christmas Eve, Hans Nielson Hauge appeared in court to receive a second and final judgement. His case had gone on for 10 long, desperate and meaningless

years. He was sentenced to pay 1,000 specie dollars (an old Norwegian unit of money) penalty for unlawful meeting assembly. The money was to go to the poor. For Hauge, though, the prisoner held for further investigation, it was much, much more important

that he was completely, and for all time, acquitted of the main charge of financial dishonesty. More than 600 inquiries throughout the country had clearly and unanimously demonstrated his innocence. That same evening, he sat down and wrote a Christmas letter to friends about how Norway's government had overruled the malevolent Danish accusations.

And so they celebrated a happy and great Christmas in freedom at Bakkehaugen. Hauge was in excellent spirit, for now he could, as a free man, enter into holy matrimony. Four weeks later, his marriage to Andrea Nyhus took place. Life took on new

meaning, with great expectations.

1815

The year of the wedding had not ended before a great sorrow fell upon the people at Bakkehaug. Just before Christmas, they went about in anticipation and concern as they awaited their first child. The anxiety was spawned by Andrea's frightened presentiment that she would die in childbirth. And just before Christmas, she gave birth to a son. They gave him the name Andreas. Some days later, Andrea died of childbirth fever. During Christmas, her casket stood awaiting burial. As husband and spiritual guide, Hauge struggled with hope against hope at his wife's deathbed. The dying one had only the one prayer that God's mercy would grant her to come "inside the door of God's kingdom." Man and wife talked and prayed and gave thanks together up to the moment Andrea closed her eyes in faith's peace unto eternal life. On that lonely Christmas Eve, Hauge sat by the cradle of little Andreas, the boy who should carry on the family name.



Many times, he was near the dark valley of despondency. The task was so overwhelming, the strength so little.

Thus, on a November Sunday in 1823, he experienced a mighty renewal of the spirit; something that resembled the complete assurance experiences he had in 1796, 1797 and 1811. In a letter of Nov. 25, 1823, he wrote: "Last Sunday I experienced a powerful working on my heart, which I hadn't felt so living for many years."

In that light from eternity, Hauge celebrated his last Christmas on earth. The house was filled with gladness and guests. Some of the friends stayed over New Year's 1824.

Only a few months into that year, Hauge moved into the Light of God. In a great burst of breath, and with a clear voice, he had been able to say, "Follow Jesus!" On the 53rd anniversary of his birth, he lay in state.

Oh, You eternal, loving God.

— *From Hellige Jul*
Translated from
Norwegian by
Pastor Raynard Huglen
Newfolden, Minn.

1823

In the year that followed, Hauge experienced many a blessed Christmas, first at Bakkehaug and, after 1817, at the large farm, Bredtvedt in Aker (outside of Oslo). There, he moved with his new wife, Ingeborg Marie Olsdatter. The hospitality at Bredtvedt seemed to be almost endless. To festive gatherings of friends went, in six rich years, flocks of guests through the home's open doors: bishops, men of



Looking forward to going home

"I'll be home for Christmas" is the hopeful declaration of a popular song and the wish of many people. They believe going home is what Christmas is all about.

For some, however, the ending of the song is quite true: "I'll be home for Christmas. If only in my dreams." The song was originally written with military personnel in mind whose service to their country prevented them from going home, except in their dreams.

"Going home" is only a dream for many. They dream of a home like one of those portrayed on Christmas cards or pictured in commercials. Everyone there loves each gift they receive. Every giver feels appreciated. The decorations are beautiful and meet with everyone's approval. No one's feelings are hurt. No offensive or angry words are said. Everyone gets along. And each person's favorite food is served.

Homes like that might exist on cards or in books or on TV. But in the real world, every family is a collection of sinful human beings. No home is perfect. Things don't work out exactly right. Disagreements over decorations, music, food and numerous other things often arise. Gifts are the wrong size, the wrong style, the same as what someone else gave, or just not something the person likes.

Home can be a place full of difficult memories. For some it's a place full of difficult people. They say, "I'll be home for Christmas," with fear.

Do you have to be able to sing "I'll be home for Christmas" with joyful anticipation in order to have a meaningful Christmas? No. It's great if you can. If you're going to be part of a wonderful, loving family gathering this Christmas, give thanks. Cherish the time. Don't take it for granted. Realize how blessed you are.

At the same time be sensitive to those who won't be a part of a joyous family celebration. Let's keep in mind that a statement like "Christmas is all about family," in a way is telling someone without a family or with a fractured family, "Christmas can't have any meaning for you."

Christmas can be a very difficult time of year for many. The bitterness of a broken home is brought into a glaring light. The absence of departed loved ones is more profoundly felt. Let us take care that we minister to the hurt instead of adding to it.

We most definitely must work at building up and encouraging families. We rejoice over those homes

where things are going well. But we don't hold up a happy home as a work that earns God's favor. It is a wonderful gift from God. All praise goes to Him.

Those who do not have joyful, peaceful homes are still loved by God and of great value to Him. They are not lesser members of His kingdom. And they can still have a Christmas with meaning and joy, for Christmas is not to be first and foremost a celebration of family. We celebrate the coming of Jesus.

I remember when I was first struck by the realization that because of the deaths of my parents I no longer had a home to go back to. It had been good when I was in school or living elsewhere to know there was a place where I would always be welcome, where I knew I was loved. There would always be a bed available for me. I could enter without knocking. I could raid the fridge and make myself at home without hav-

ing to wait for an invitation. But then the time came when there was no longer a place where a family member was waiting to welcome me home.

Around that same time I came across a song called "I Will Bring You Home," by Michael Card based on Zephaniah 3:20 where God states, "At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home." The song became words of encouragement from God to me: "Though you

are homeless, though you're alone; I will be your home. Whatever's the matter, whatever's been done; I will be your home. ... In this fearful, fallen place, I will be your home." Then stanza two looks ahead to when the Lord brings us to our true and final home: "Home to your own place, in a beautiful land; I will bring you home."

Because of Jesus I do have a home, now and forever.

Christmas is about being home. It's about Jesus leaving His home to give us a home. "Jesus replied, 'If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him'" (John 14:23, NIV).

Christ left the glory of heaven to make His home with us. So whatever the status of our earthly dwelling, whoever might or might not be sharing it with us, we have a home when we have a living, saving, personal relationship with Jesus.

May you have a wonderful Christmas, and may Christ be your home.

— *Pastor Craig Johnson*

**Christmas is about
being home. It's
about Jesus leaving
His home to give us
a home.**

SOMETHING TO SHARE

God came near

“**A**nd the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The Word — vague, an idea, an abstract notion of truth, communicated clearly, subject to misinterpretation. Flesh — defined, visible, something we can touch, something we can know — really know.

Christmas — again we celebrate the Advent, when God came near. And what was once vague and distant (the smoke and fire of the Old Testament, the words that the prophets spoke) is again seen lying in a manger, cradled in the arms of a young peasant girl, and we wonder at the mystery of it all.

God Almighty stepped from heaven to earth, trading glory for baby flesh, that mankind might know what divinity is. “God is Love,” we read. At Christmas, we see an advance of intimacy unlike anything we find in the Old Testament. God is held by humans.

Vulnerability defined. A sacrifice was made, that we might understand love. God goes to great lengths to make clear to us how desperately He longs for us to know Him. Christ, at Christmas, conveys to me His heart for reaching a lost world. And in that, He shows me how.

God took on a commonality with man — and one easily recognizable — He became one of us. He taught

us to hurt — but not without hope. He taught us to find purpose in pain and to see beyond the grave, knowing that pain and death were as much a part of this life as life itself. Christ shared in our sufferings, that we might know something different, that we might know life.

Like Christ, this strain of commonality — one of pain and disappointment — is one we share as believers with the rest of the race, but with a different take. Our hope, as weak as it may sometimes seem, is sure and steadfast because the object of our trust is unchanging — unlike the facades of hope that surface now and then in our world. Christ comes as one aware of pain, aware of death. And in that context, He brings life.

As people longing to bring that life to the world, longing to follow Christ’s example, we’d do well to learn from Christmas, again, the value of relationships. When the Word became flesh, God came near. And Jesus put the heart of the Father on display.

In the Gospels, we see Him heal the blind, we see Him love the disciples and we see Him delight in His Father’s will — that is, until the night before His death. For here we find Him sweating drops of blood, praying, fighting to reconcile the Father’s purposes with His pain. Because I know this — because I see

Jesus fight despair, and win — I trust Him. And how else could we know of this battle if not for Christmas?

God saw that love required the context of a relationship — an intimate nearness. And as intimacy required vulnerability (and still does today), He stepped from heaven to earth, became a man (who was first a baby) and put love into very practical terms. Now His Spirit dwells in the hearts of those who love Him, and He seeks to do this very same thing today.

Through our commonalities with fallen man (namely, we still hurt, we still cry, we still die), God has given us an avenue to intimacy with those who need Him. And as it did 2,000 years ago, intimacy still requires vulnerability. There is a time for us to drop our fancy robes and admit we are still human to those who are human. And in our humanness, like Christ, the Father shows those who hurt something different in the midst of death: life. And again, through our vulnerability, God comes near.

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