

The Lutheran AMBASSADOR

December 19, 1995



THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

Volume 33, Number 16



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

Editor: Rev. Craig Johnson

Assistant to the Editor: Solveig Hjermstad

Editorial Board: Rev. John Mundfrom, Oryen Benrud.

CONTENTS

God sent His Son	p. 3
Selected for great honor	p. 4
Why Bethlehem?	p. 6
Sing the Good News	p. 10

Cover art by Ken Thoreson,
Janesville, Wisconsin

**This is my beloved son
with whom I am well pleased**

*God's hands holding the straw of
the manger in which the Christ
Child was born, presenting
the Savior to the world.
Born in the shadow of the Cross*

The Lutheran Ambassador

(USPS 588-620 ISSN 0746-3413)

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

For editorial inquiries and information:
The Lutheran Ambassador, Box 423, Faith, SD 57626; (605) 967-2381; fax (605) 967-2382. E-Mail Craig JN @ aol.com.

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

Second-class 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

Divine appointment

You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you.

— John 15:16

God has a purpose for each of our lives. Nothing happens by chance or coincidence but is under the watchful eye of our heavenly Father. This even includes our prayers and the answers we receive from God.

Remember how Jesus described God's desire for us to enjoy a fruitful prayer life, "By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples" (John 15:8)? He restates that truth here, and emphasizes God's sovereign plan, "that you should go and bear fruit." Then he adds another important aspect of a fruitful prayer life, "that your fruit should remain."

Last July I conducted the funeral of a long-time member of our congregation. I would describe him as a prayer warrior. Not only did he tell me he was praying for me, he kept his promise faithfully. He always seemed to know when to stop in the office and visit me, and his visits were always encouraging. He told me of revivals he had seen, and was praying for revival in our congregation. I miss his presence and his prayers. Tucked in his Bible were these words written on a piece of paper: "I have complete assurance of my acceptance by God on account of Christ and His death on the cross." What a treasure to leave to your family — something that lasts into eternity!

Do you want to leave something permanent to your children? Teach them to pray. Teach them that God hears and answers our prayers. Teach them to turn to Christ in difficult times, instead of trying to pull yourself up by the bootstrap.

Remember Christ's promises about prayer and you will not give up! "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples."

Enjoy the art of prayer. Prayer becomes a burden and drudgery when you turn it into a human work, or you begin to tell God how to solve your problems. Release the problem and trust God's timing in finding the solution. God knows better what we need and when we need it.

When we truly love, we pray. God invites us to walk the less-traveled road of prayer, to set aside our personal agendas, and persevere until God mercifully sends Holy Spirit revival.



— by Rev. Joel
Lohafner
Triumph
Lutheran
Ferndale,
Washington

God sent His son

— Rev. Ted Berkas
Calvary Lutheran
Wallace, South Dakota



Some of you know the joy this Christmas season of having a newborn baby in your house. Surely the incredibly soft presence of an infant fosters compassion and gentleness in your heart. Bill and Gloria Gaither had it right when they wrote, "How sweet to hold a newborn baby, and feel the pride and joy he gives." Yet how much more that is true when considering the tender mercies of our God revealed miraculously when He sent His Son into our world of shadows and strife.

Mary and Joseph first held in their arms the sweet, little Jesus boy there in the roughness of the stable. We can imagine how, in awe, they traced the tiny fingers, the breathing chest, the button nose, the softness of His little face, peeping through the swaddling clothes. It was as if the little Child, awake and returning their gaze, was communicating to them,

"Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart."

They recalled perhaps the words of Uncle Zacharias who, moved by the tender mercies of God, foretold how this little one would become the one to open the life gate, to allow the heavenly Son to rise, to shine on all who sit in darkness, to guide their feet into the way of peace.

How gracious of the heavenly Father, in the fullness of time, to send down His Son to be born of a woman, to come gently as our Brother kind and good. This little one of Bethlehem would grow up to proclaim the name of the Lord to His brothers, to sing God's praise in the congregation, to be the Leader, tasting death on behalf of His brothers, so that He might be merciful and faithful in representing them before God and pay for the sins of His people. He came to love, heal, and forgive so that someday He might stand before His Father and say, "Here I am and the children you have given me."

The hymn writer said it well:

*Fatherlike, He tends and spares us;
Well our feeble frame He knows;
In His hands He gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes;
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Widely as His mercy goes.*

The expanse of God's mercy extends outward this season through the gentleness of grace in the form of the Child. For unto us a Son is given! The little One who became the great One — yes, the only One. Through precious and great promises, through carols and concerts, through pageants and Sunday school Christmas programs, the tender mercies of our God reach across the miles to draw us to the Savior.

***O, Holy Child of
Bethlehem, descend
to us we pray!***



Selected for great honor

— Pastor Warren Swanson
Freedom and St. Petrie Parish
Ottawa, Illinois

For months, James had begged his father, Reuban to let him come along herding the sheep. His father had finally allowed him to join them tonight.

It was so cold. The wind was blowing out of the west and forced its way right through his cloak.

"James, come over here by the fire and keep warm," his father called. James looked up at the sky and thought how beautiful it was out here. He walked over to the fire and sat down against a large rock along with his father and the other shepherds. Only Levi was missing. Old Levi was out as night watchman.

James leaned his head against the rock and basked in the heat of the fire. He must have fallen asleep for a moment when he was awakened by the most beautiful music he had ever heard.



Why were the lowly shepherds selected to the great honor of the announcement? When we think of a shepherd, we think of a rough and smelly, outdoorsy type of individual. A person who spends a great deal of time with the sheep watching them — not a person of great learning or refinement. Why then were they chosen?

Might it be that God wanted to impress upon us the association between a shepherd's life and the life of the Savior? A most beloved psalm refers to us as the sheep and to our relationship with the shepherd. A favorite symbol of the Savior

is of Him leaving the ninety and nine and going after the sheep which is lost.

Why wasn't the announcement made to the religious leaders of the day? Surely, those people would have been glad to see the birth of the long-awaited Messiah. But alas, they were looking for a forceful liberator of the Jewish nation. Their frame of mind was not ready to accept a Messiah who would act as a lowly shepherd.

God chose the lowly shepherds: men of no account in the thinking of the world. God continues to act this way today. He often chooses individuals who the world would pass by for the task.

In their simple hearts, the shepherds realized that they had been given a great gift through the announcement. They left their flocks and quickly went to worship the King.

Let us approach this Christmas season with open hearts. Hearts that are willing to be impressed once again with the gift of the Savior.

All of the shepherds scrambled to their feet. Their faces turned skyward, and they saw the intense light in the heavens. Suddenly, a voice spoke out of the light.


"Fear not!" the voice said.

"Fear not; for I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you, this day, in the city of David, is born a Savior, which is Christ the Lord! And this shall be a sign unto you, you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

James could see forms moving around in the sky. Their music became louder and echoed among the hills. They chanted over and over again. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill toward men!" Suddenly, the light moved away and disappeared. The chanting continued until it, too, was lost in the distance.

James turned to his father and looked at him with wonder in his eyes. His father hugged him close and looked down at him and said quietly, "Tonight, Messiah has been born."





The necessity of the virgin birth

*Then God said, 'Let us
make man in Our image,
according to Our likeness;
and let them rule over the
fish of the sea and over the
birds of the sky and over
the cattle and over all the
earth and over every creep-
ing thing that creeps on
the earth.'*

— Genesis 1:26

*Thou dost make him to
rule over the works of Thy
hands; Thou hast put all
things under his feet.*

— Psalm 8:6

Adam and Eve and their descendants were given the authority of stewards to rule over God's creation. God, the Creator, had set in motion a creation governed by physical and moral laws, an important concept to grasp. And He bound Himself to function within those laws unless He created anew.


Satan tempted the first woman and man and they yielded to him. "Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey" (Romans 6:16). By obeying Satan's suggestion to eat of the forbidden fruit and disobeying God, they became Satan's slaves. As such, they acquired a new master, one who took their God-given dominion or rule over the earth for himself as well as receiving legal authority over his slaves — even the authority of death. Man's future was black indeed; bound in sin and death to a harsh master.

In binding Himself to His own moral laws, God could not override Satan's acquired rights and put Adam and Eve on a new track. A way had to be found for man's redemption within God's moral system. God promised that redemption to Eve.

Satan stands in the universal court accusing man and asserting his rights over man. It would take a man, one of Adam's own estate to appear in that court to regain that heritage and dominion from Satan. The dominion was given to man. It was lost by man. Only a man could have the legal right to recover it.

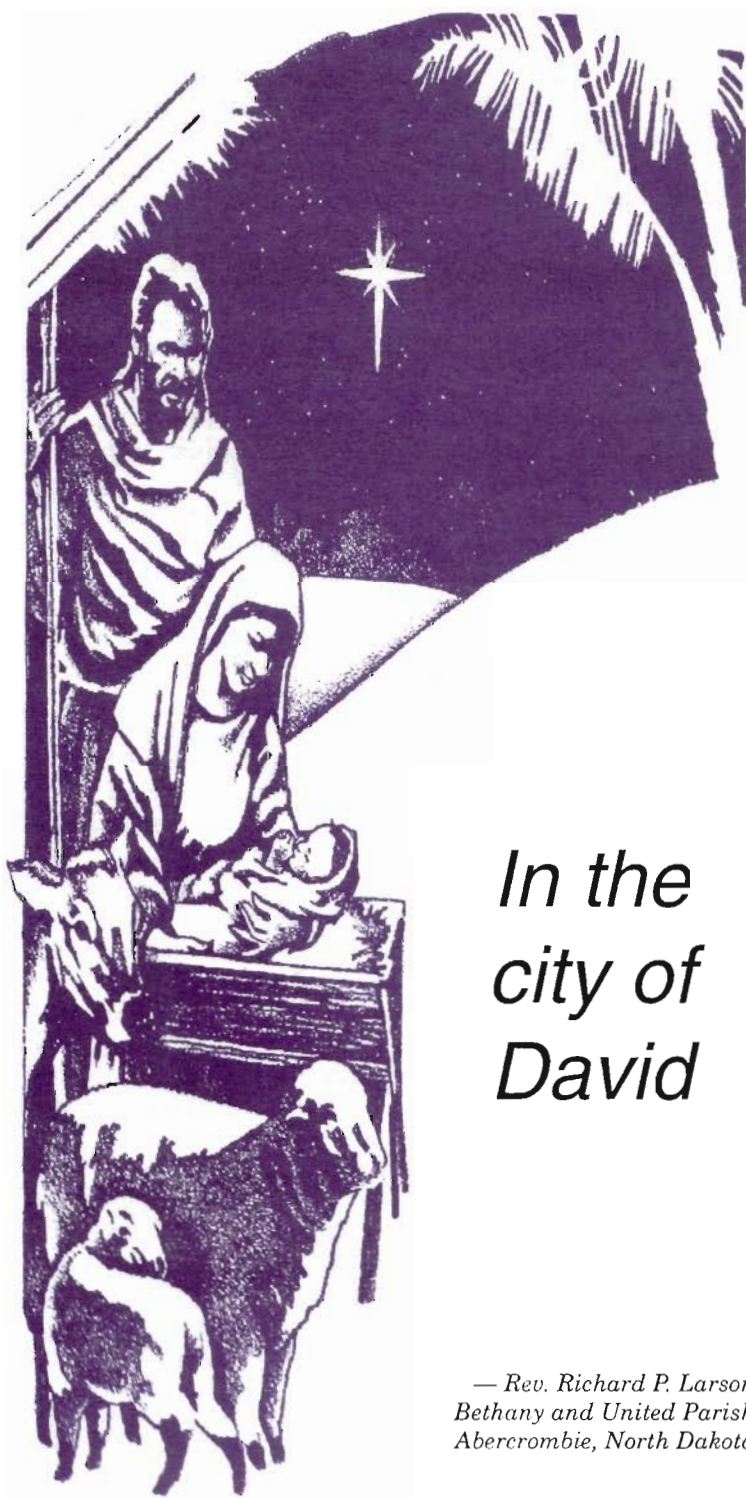
Adam and all of his descendants were slaves to Satan. They had no legal rights. All rights belonged to the slave owner, Satan. A member of the human race had to be found who was not a slave to Satan, who could legally enter the universal court and stand before God, the Judge, and plead man's case.

God's solution is given to us in Galatians 4:4: "But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law." Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and placed in a virgin. He was the second Adam (I Corinthians 15). He did not share Mary's sin nature and was not born a slave to Satan. Because He lived a life without yielding to Satan, a life without having one thought out of harmony with God, He could legally represent man in the universal court. Jesus, the second Adam, born of Mary yet not a sinner like Mary, was the man, 100% man. Thus, the necessity of the virgin birth which we celebrate at Christmas.

Jesus then had the legal right as one over whom Satan had no ownership, to step forward and accept man's punishment for sin. This allows those who have accepted the acquittal to go free. 

— Dr. Bob Kohl
Calvary Lutheran
Arlington, South Dakota

Why Bethlehem?



*In the
city of
David*

— Rev. Richard P. Larson
Bethany and United Parish
Abercrombie, North Dakota

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Each year Luke 2:8-20 is recited by our Sunday school children for the Christmas program. But where is this Bethlehem? It was a small city five miles southwest of Jerusalem in the district of Ephratah. Jacob's wife Rachel was buried in Bethlehem. Naomi and her family were from Bethlehem. It was where Boaz lived and where David was born. Samuel anointed David to succeed Saul in Bethlehem. It means "house of bread" in the Hebrew language.

But why was Jesus born in Bethlehem?

First, Jesus was born in Bethlehem because the *prophet of God* declared that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Micah wrote in 5:2, "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, (though) thou be little among the thousands of Judah, (yet) out of thee shall he come forth unto me (that is) to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth (have been) from of old, from everlasting." After Adam and Eve had sinned by their disobedience, God promised to send a Messiah. Throughout the Old Testament the promise of the Messiah for God's people was declared. Around 700 B.C. the prophet Micah told where the Messiah would be born. It would be Bethlehem. Jesus had to be born there because Micah spoke for God. The Scriptures said it would be Bethlehem and the Scriptures are without error. Micah foretold the future, something only God is able to do.

Second, Jesus was born in Bethlehem because the *promise of God* was made to David and Bethlehem was the city of David. "Hath not the Scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem,

where David was?" (John 7:42). Joseph and Mary had gone to Bethlehem because Caesar had decreed that all should be taxed. Each went to their own city to be taxed. Joseph and Mary were of the house and lineage of David. Jesus' birth was part of the promise made to David. The hymn writer Nahum Tate summed this up in the words: "To you, in David's town this day, is born of David's line, the Savior who is Christ the Lord."

Third, Jesus was born in Bethlehem because of the *providence of God*. Bethlehem is where Mary and Joseph were when the fullness of time came. "But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). It was part of God's plan. The time and place were part of His design.

Fourth, Jesus was born in Bethlehem and the *people of God* knew it. King Herod was troubled when the wise men came from the east asking where the one born "King of the Jews" was located. Herod brought in the chief priests and scribes to ask the religious leaders where the Christ was to be born. They told him Bethlehem. They knew the answer, but sadly did not realize it was Jesus.

Fifth, Jesus was born in Bethlehem because it was part of the *provision of God*. It was necessary to redeem mankind and so God had a marvelous plan. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). It was part of God's plan to save us. Jesus Christ came to Bethlehem that first Christmas in order to save you from your sin. He accomplished this by living a perfect life, and then was crucified. He was raised from the dead and is now seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. He will return. Provision has been made that you might spend eternity with Him.



Good news! A Savior is born!

A pioneer missionary was presenting the Christian message to a people who had never heard the good news. His faithful efforts to translate the gospel into their language, however, faced an enormous obstacle: he could not discover any word in their tribal tongue for savior or salvation.

The mission work languished and declined, according to the story as recounted in an old devotional book, because there was apparently no way to announce the gospel message to a people who could not comprehend what it meant to be saved.

And the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." — Luke 2:10-11

Christmas is not about tinsel and trees, family and feasts, traditions and toys, or gifts and garlands. It is sad that many will miss the heart of the holiday again this year because they are strangers to the Savior whose birthday is the reason for the season. They are like the people whose language even seemed to lack a word for salvation.

But the missionary in our story persisted. Then one day a villager came running over to him in great excitement, telling the tale of an attack by a wild animal and a rescue by his friend. "What did your friend do for you?" the missionary asked. The man replied, "He saved me!" This was the translation breakthrough needed, the message of salvation could now be proclaimed in all of its fullness, and many were born again to new life in Christ as a result.

So we persist, and celebrate Christmas in spite of the multitudes who do not seem to understand. May the Lord provide us once more during this holiday season with many opportunities to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ our Savior, so that believers will be blessed and some will find salvation.

Best wishes to all readers of The Lutheran Ambassador from our AFLC family!



— Robert L. Lee

There's no place like home



— Elaine (Strand) Mundfrom
Lutheran Church of Hope
Loveland, Colorado

During my childhood days in North Dakota, Christmas was always cold and snowy, sometimes icy; but always wonderful. The hugs, the laughter, the wonderful smells, the sharing — these are the memories and traditions of Christmas. How do you spend Christmas? What are your traditions?

I remember as a child going to Grandma and Grandpa's house and having memorable times with aunts, uncles, and lots of cousins. Now I have gone from being one of the cousins to being one of the aunts; but the wonderful times have not changed. In the 70s and 80s, when we were a young family living "somewhere" in North Dakota, we anticipated spending Christmas at my parents' farm, often arriving just in time for the candlelight service on Christmas Eve. Going home for Christmas was a highlight of my year. I always wondered when the rest of the family would be arriving, how long they could stay, and whether our visits would overlap for at least a day or two.

Every Christmas changed a little, too. For years my Grandmas always joined us sometime during Christmas; but then the time arrived when we missed them greatly. There were new girlfriends, boyfriends, fiancés, the spouses; finally a wonderful new baby or two. My sisters and I always agreed, "You just had to be there."

I remember the year Dad got a toilet seat under the tree from some thoughtful soul; and the

year of the Farming Game when my brothers learned how to "farm" year around in North Dakota. And the year in which two of my brothers got beautiful new sweaters, but in the picture, I cut off their heads so now I'm not quite sure which two brothers it was! Then there was the year Mom and Dad moved off the farm between Thanksgiving and Christmas — an exhausting experience — I made the lefse and sent it home to Mom from Arkansas to say "thanks" for all the years she had made it for me.

So just what is it that draws us like a magnet to be home with family at Christmas? I could poll my family (or Dan's family), but I know that each would say it is the common bond that we share in Christ Jesus. God showed His awesome love for us by sending His only Son, Jesus, and although that bond is there year around, it seems especially strong at Christmas when we celebrate His coming to earth for us. The beautiful carol reminds us that "Love Came Down at Christmas," but He didn't stop there. That same Love went to the cross, suffered and died for each of us and rose victoriously from the grave that we might have eternal life, if only we trust in the Love with all our heart.

Jesus Christ is the Love. He is the bond that holds us together. He is the reason we gather as families during the Christmas season. In John 15, Jesus commanded us to "love one another that your joy may be full." What

Loving

— Sarah (Huglen) Johnson
Calvary Lutheran
Fergus Falls, Minnesota

Christmas is just around the corner. Soon our family will drive around town and look at the Christmas lights. The sights and sounds of Christmas have been in the stores for months. The sweet aroma of Christmas baking fills the homes. Children are practicing for the programs and choirs are performing the glorious music around the world. What an exciting time of year!

My husband and I enjoy sharing with one another our childhood memories and especially how our families decorated our homes for Christmas.

I remember helping Mom untangle the lights and then watching her carefully place them on the tree. Next came the ornaments, each with a special meaning. Garland, lights and a large wreath on the front door were always present. The advent circle of candles sat on the dining room table and the manger scene in the living

"So just what is it that draws us like a magnet ...?"

better place to start than with our families. That Love draws us closer as we share our struggles and pain and He is the bond that enables us to rejoice and celebrate together.

For the past four Christmas seasons, we have been unable to be "up north" with family due to weather and distance, but I believe "all hearts go home at Christmas." I look forward to that

memories



room. Our home took on a special warm feeling as we decorated and celebrated the birth of our Lord.

For many years, Grandma

Monseth would bring beautifully decorated Christmas cookies and treats that we enjoyed during the season. Going to Grandma Huglen's on Christmas Day was something that our whole family looked forward to. We could see her home from a distance because there were lights inside and out. She always had a lovely table with candles and pretty napkins. My uncle Raynard Huglen and my aunt Valborg Huglen continue to decorate their home and make it a special place to go each Christmas, even though Grandma is no longer with us. Dad tells about how his family had real candles on their tree. They would place the tree in the middle of the room, hold hands around the tree and sing Christmas carols.

Mark remembers the excitement of unpacking the Christmas decorations and helping bring in the tree. To him, some of the decorations were almost life-like. The three stately wisemen and the small stable his parents had made out of wood from a barn, were placed on the table. He recalls going to bed with a special warmth and joy, knowing that the

Christmas Eve phone call from Dad who says, "Merry Christmas! We sure miss all of you and we love you." It always brings tears to my eyes and such a longing to be there in person. In the background, I hear the music, the laughter and can almost smell the food! My mind and heart take me back to Christmases on the farm when five bedrooms suddenly were way too few; to joy and laughter flowing from our hearts; to babies who wore Christmas bows on their heads; to toddlers who pushed and shoved but now are teenagers and best friends.

This November, our 18-year-old son, in his first year at AFLBS, called home and asked, "What are we doing for Christmas? Are you coming north or should I come to Colorado? It doesn't matter to me; I just want to be where y'all are." Bound together in love, through Jesus Christ, families and Christmas — that is the way it was truly meant to be.

Continue to bind us together with your love, Lord Jesus.



"It must have been important."

time to celebrate Christ's birth was near.

One thing we mutually agree is outstanding in our memories: yes, we loved the treats, presents and family times, but the true meaning of Christmas was clearly the most important. God loved us so much that He became flesh and dwelt among us, one day sacrificing His life for the sins of the world. That is worth celebrating! Though we may decorate once a year, we pray our hearts will be in daily celebration of the coming of Christ.

Mark and I have been married over five years and we await the arrival of our second child. We have been blessed by what our parents have taught us by example. We want our children to also be touched each year by the celebration of our Savior's birth. For us, it does not necessarily mean that expensive and elaborate decorations will be displayed. For some families, it may mean that a single candle is lighted each year to remember the birthday of Christ.

I commented to my mother-in-law on how impressed I was by Mark's detailed memory of their decorations at home. She simply replied, "It must have been important." Important it was, and is, and will continue to be for many generations to come.

Special memories are formed each Christmas which direct us to the awesome reality of God's great mercy and love. With little children in our home, our tree may only be decorated half way up for the next few years, but we pray that no matter what, our hearts will be decorated with the love of Christ.



*Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled."
Joyful all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With th'angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem."*



Has there ever been a song that has sparked a good memory for you? If you are like me, then there are many songs that bring memories — some good and some bad, but all meaningful. When I hear the above great hymn of Charles Wesley, my mind flies back to Christmas caroling.

One of my earliest experiences in caroling was in the early 1960s in northern Minnesota. Our church got a school bus and we drove from farm to farm singing. The snow was deep and the temperature was cold but the fellowship was warm. We returned around 2 a.m. The hot chocolate never tasted so good!

Singing has always been important to the Abel family and Christmas was no exception. A highlight for our family at Christmas was the singing and not the food or gifts.

This is as it should be, for music has always been an important part of every great event of the church. Even on that

Sing the

first glorious night there was music all over the heavens. Imagine it!

Christmas caroling always had an objective in our family. The first purpose was to **glorify God**. Though we enjoyed some lighter songs, our main focus was on the Christian carols. This is what the angels did, for "they praised God and said, 'Glory to God in the highest'" (Luke 2:14).

In Israel, music was worship. Worship takes the effort of concentrating on the One we are worshipping. So many times when we traveled as a family (there were nine of us), we sang, "Over the river and through the snow, to grandmother's house we go" and indeed Grandma was in our thoughts. Yet when we sing of God, is **He** in our thoughts or are we thinking of other things? Worship requires a concentrated effort.

The second purpose was **joy**. Singing is joy. Singing in Israel was an expression of joy. Even though much of the world's music does not have joy, it is used to take away the blues. Christian Christmas music more than any, expresses great joy. Its theme is, "I bring you good news of great joy."

The incomparable Christ



RNS photo.

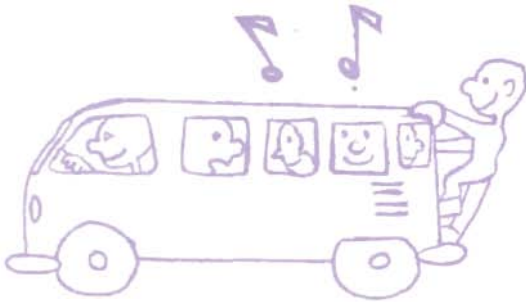
He came from the bosom of the Father to the bosom of a woman. He put on humanity that we might put on divinity. He became Son of Man that we might become sons of God.

He was born contrary to the laws of nature, lived in poverty, was reared in obscurity, and only once crossed the boundary of the land in childhood. He had no wealth or influence, and had neither training nor education in the world's schools. His relatives were inconspicuous and uninfluential.

In infancy He startled a king; in boyhood He puzzled the learned doctors; in manhood He ruled the course of nature. He walked upon the billows and hushed the sea to sleep. He healed the multitudes without medicine and made no charge for His services. He never wrote a book, yet all the libraries of the country could not hold the books that have been written about Him. He never wrote a song, yet He has furnished

Good News!

— Rev. Jonathan Abel
AFLC missionary to Brazil



I recall once when I was president of our youth group in Campo Mourão, Brazil, we planned to go caroling one night at 10 p.m. We started at the church. About thirty kids piled into two vehicles. Calvin Knapp drove the VW van and I drove a Jeep wagon. We were to cover about thirty miles. After we had sung at two houses, the accelerator cable of the van broke. We soon discovered a solution — one person hung on the back of the van where the motor was and accelerated with his foot on the carburetor. Another shouted instructions and a third person drove. So we went on rejoicing through

most of the night till we had only two houses left. Then the Jeep ran out of gas. We pushed it to a nearby home and left the VW van at a gas station for repair. Invigorated by our joyous spirit, we walked home.

Finally, we as a family saw Christmas caroling as **evangelism** since it is the good news. The angels said: "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 ... peace on earth to men on whom His favor rests" (Luke 2:10,11,14b). This was a victorious song and Satan was doomed.

When we went caroling, we primarily sang to the shut-ins of the church, the widows, someone needing a word of encouragement or a new believer — all people who needed the good news and victory. We sang on the **streets** as a witness to our neighbors. This caused such an impact that later we heard many good reports.

Ministering the optimistic word of hope to a lost and hurting world through Christian Christmas caroling has been one of the greatest experiences of my life. I hope it can be for you, too. As you go caroling this year, remember to do it as worship to God, an expression of your joy, and to meet the spiritual needs of others in bringing the true joy of Christmas.



the theme for more songs than all songwriters together. He never founded a college, yet all the schools together cannot boast of as many students as He has. He never practiced medicine, and yet He healed more broken hearts than the doctors have healed broken bodies.

He is the Star of astronomy, the Rock of geology, the Lion and the Lamb of zoology, the Harmonizer of all discords, and the Healer of all diseases. Great men have come and gone, yet He lives on. Herod could not kill Him; Satan could not seduce Him; death could not destroy Him; the grave could not hold Him.

He was rich, yet for our sake became poor. How poor? Ask Mary. Ask the wise men. He slept in another's manger; He cruised the lake in another's boat; He rode on another man's donkey. He was buried in another man's tomb.

He is the ever Perfect One, the Chiefest among ten thousand. He is altogether lovely.



— First Lutheran Newsletter, 12/94
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
taken from Pulpit Helps
Published by AMG International
Chattanooga, TN 37442

Christmas shared

Clara and I have shared forty Christmas seasons in our married life. These Christmases have been varied — traditional and nontraditional, but all interesting and enjoyable. They have been enjoyable because of the joy we have had in sharing the celebration of God's love; that love demonstrated in the birth of His Son. Jesus came into the world sharing Himself, bringing the peace that passes all understanding.

— Peace that came in the

midst of the storm on the Sea of Galilee.

— Peace that came to the lady at Jacob's Well.

— Peace that filled the troubled hearts of the disciples after the torment of suffering and death on the cross as the resurrected Christ met them.

— Peace that changed the lives of people, and

— Peace that still changes lives today.

Every time Jesus comes to people working His changes in their lives there is peace. Yes, even in the most difficult times. We as a family bear testimony to that peace and do so with great appreciation and thanks.

Forty Christmases began with the two of us sharing time

Silent as the stars

Winter creeps in, silent as the stars; only when it is full upon us will it howl around the house corner and rattle its icy knuckles at the door and windows. It is as though time itself were now at rest for a moment, a solemn pause before the season of the Nativity and the turning of the year.

— Hal Borland (*An American Year*)

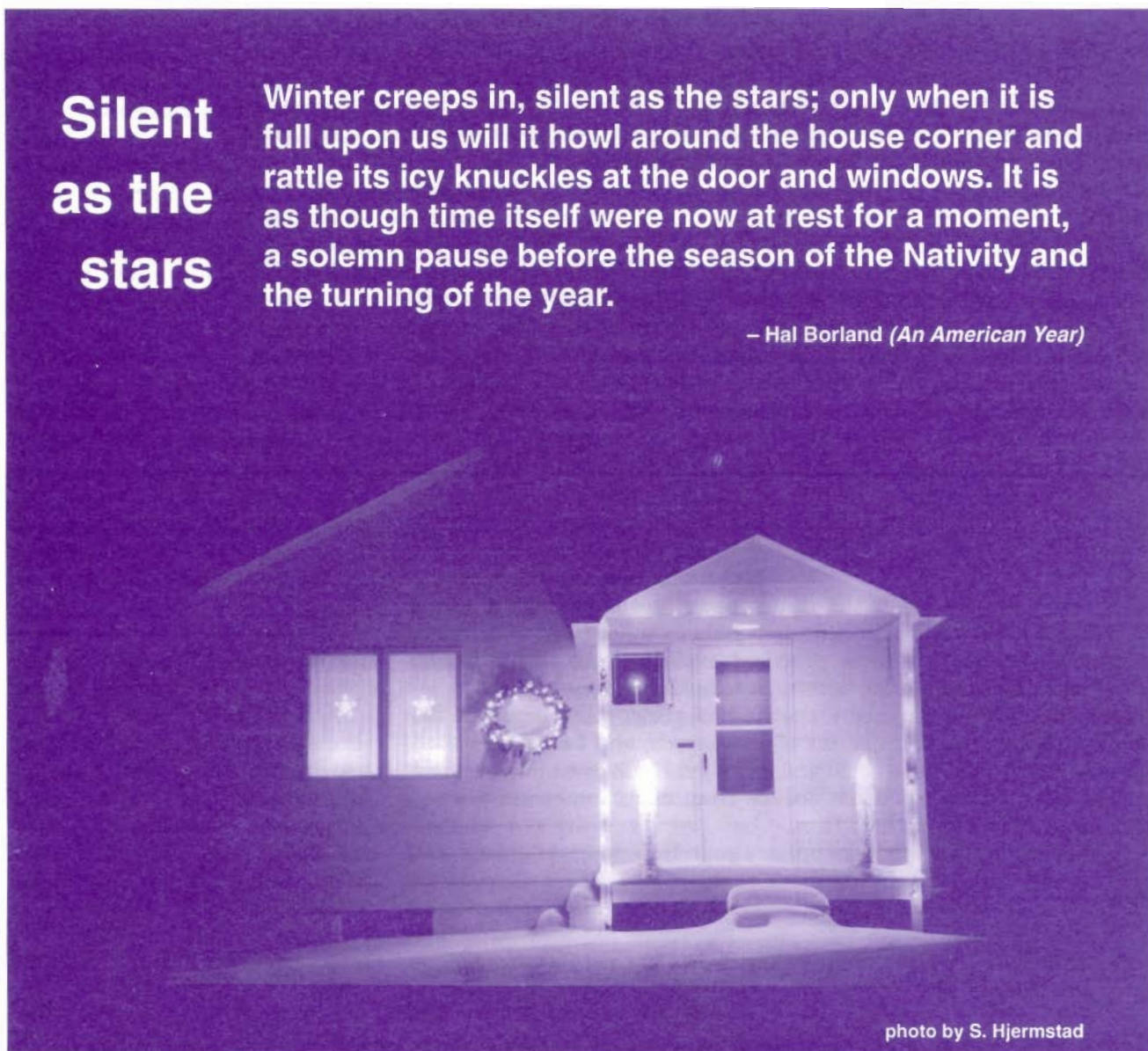


photo by S. Hjermsstad

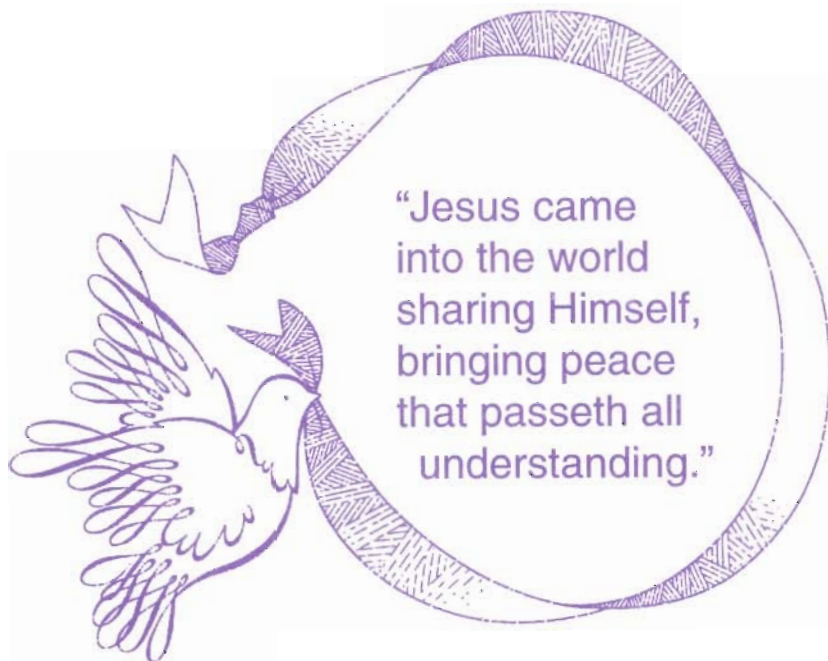
— Rev. Dick Gunderson
Puebla, Mexico

between our two families. Later, the absence of my parents and Clara's mother left empty spaces in our celebrations. On the other hand, the years have seen the addition of six children, three daughters-in-law, a son-in-law and, joy of joys, three grandchildren. We have shared in God's blessing together in so many celebrations over so many years.

We shall never forget our first Christmas in Bolivia. Leaving Minneapolis and arriving in LaPaz the first part of December, we experienced the first of many drastic changes. In the midst of these changes we as a family experienced the joy of sharing the Christmas celebration with others in our mission family. With each succeeding Christmas this fellowship became more precious — our kids had a large family of aunts and uncles and cousins.

The following year we were just out of language school and getting ready to teach at the Bible school on Coaba Farm when Christmas arrived. It was special having a house that would become our home for the next four years, having a Christmas tree, rediscovering the contents of our barrels that had taken well over a year to arrive by boat and be cleared through customs. There they were — the pre-packed Christmas gifts now to be opened. It was like the planned and promised arrival of the Christ child, the Christ, the Anointed One who came to share His life. Christmas is discovery.

There was the Christmas when through adoption and the birth of twins, our number of children doubled in less than a year! We watched again the excitement of little ones beginning to discover Christmas and that it is much more than packaged gifts. It is



"Jesus came
into the world
sharing Himself,
bringing peace
that passeth all
understanding."

The Gift, discovered through the advent tree hanging with its Bible verses and relating ornaments to be placed on the tree, little ones eagerly struggling to read a verse like the older ones in the family devotional time. Christmas is sharing together.

In 1977 we began sharing Christmases in Nogales in the WMPL mission home; sometimes with a full house of visitors like gospel teams and "snow birds." I remember a Christmas Eve trying to get a Bolivian student out of a Mexican jail because of traveling without permission to the border. On either side of the border, we celebrated the birth of the same Savior who gave Himself so that all might come to know the joy of His salvation.

Then there were Christmases in snowy and cold Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan contrasted to sunny Arizona and rainy Washington. Congregations opened their hearts to us. We experienced radical adjustments to different communities, states and countries. And now a new and almost scary Christmas adjustment lies ahead — no children, no immediate family. For Clara and me, full circle! Just the

two of us with our family far away again. But wait. That isn't right, is it? It is not just the two of us now anymore than it ever has been, for Jesus' promise is "And lo, I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

Yes, another Christmas knowing that Jesus is with us. Another Christmas to look forward to being a part of yet another family, the congregations of the Puebla district. While we will deeply miss our family members, our lives and service lead us to the opportunities of sharing with an ever expanding and blessed fellowship as a part of this family of believers. And Jesus is Here! We have the privilege of sharing the Good News. Jesus has come! Jesus is Here! Jesus is coming again!

As you read this, I encourage you to share Christmas — the Christ of Christmas with others. It is a time when people are open and willing to hear what we have to say. Share it!



A nervous student

The snow came early that year, and it stayed. People kept on shoveling out, but the paths to the houses were no more cleared, before they were filled in again. The older folks were of the opinion that we were in for a winter such as happened in pioneer days, when people could regularly be snowed under in their sod houses out on the Dakota prairie or in their log cabins in the northern Minnesota forests.

My friend Einar and I sat in his simple room in an idyllic village in northern Minnesota and read, talked and enjoyed ourselves. It was so pleasant to be inside while the wind blew and the snow drifted outdoors. I had come to the place a couple of days before to celebrate Christmas together with my friend and former schoolmate. The people of the house had written and assured me that I was welcome if I would share a room with Einar and take things as they had them.

"Take things as we have them," I repeated to my friend. "Never in my life have I had such service: coffee in bed in the morning and coffee in the room each afternoon. And then the meals in the room downstairs, where there is an abundance of delicious food, which doesn't every day greet the Augsburg student's insatiable hunger! It is no doubt best for me that this luxury doesn't last too long," I added.

There was a service in the town church on Christmas morning and late in the afternoon there was a Christmas tree program for the Sunday school children. The pastor announced that student (Lars) Hompland, who had conducted Norwegian parochial school in the parish churches the past summer and who had been invited to be the pastor's assistant during Christmas, was to have spoken, but he

hadn't arrived. However, there was another student from Augsburg in the assembly and perhaps he could sing a song and say a little afterward. This was nothing to be surprised at. Pastors and congregations in those days took it for granted that young people from Augsburg, whether they studied theology or not, should be prepared at any time to witness or speak when they were called upon to do so.

When the children's fest was over my friend and I were invited to the parsonage for supper. We enjoyed the pastor family's overflowing hospitality in full measure till out in the evening.

Then that pleasure came to an abrupt end.

The pastor took out his pocket watch, looked at it a little, then looked directly at me and said,

"The little train that runs through here hasn't gotten through the heavy snow for two days. Therefore, undoubtedly student Hompland won't be coming until Monday. Meantime, a service has been scheduled for him in Skibtvedt Church (near Battle Lake, Minnesota) tomorrow morning, and, as you know, you are to preach at the afternoon service here in town."

Yes, that I knew only too well. For two weeks I had read, prayed and struggled to prepare something that could resemble a sermon, but the results had been so poor. And the pastor added, "I don't see any other way but that you also preach at Skibtvedt tomorrow morning. I myself have a service in one of the parish's other churches."

This felt worse than a blow in the face. How could I get a sermon ready by tomorrow morning when it had taken me two weeks

to prepare a little sermon for the afternoon service. And I had never preached at a worship service before. Now I also looked at the clock. It was already past nine. Quickly we came home and without any ceremony I went up to the room.

I had read the day's text three or four times and tried as much as I could to fasten some thoughts on the text, when my friend came into the room. There was a trace of sympathy on his face when he said, "If you are going to preach tomorrow morning it is best that you get to bed in proper time, so that you can be fresh and rested up. Then you will think so much more clearly and you will see that things will go well for you."

That can probably sound like the wisdom of Solomon for others, but for me, like frivolous foolishness. I told my friend to hurry to bed and keep quiet.

So I sat there at the little writing table with the text before me. Now and then I scratched my head, prayed a little, brooded, thought, but didn't get anywhere. "Get to bed," came now and then from my friend.

At last I rose in irritation, went over to the edge of the bed and threatened, "If you don't keep quiet, I will go into the pulpit tomorrow, talk for ten minutes as an introduction and then announce that you will continue." And then it became very quiet over in the bed. Not a protest more did I hear from my friend before sleep overcame him.

Long out into the night I also went to bed and soon dreamed that I stood in the pulpit and read the text with the greatest confidence. But then when I was going to speak my throat became dry and the words were like glue in the corners of my mouth. It seemed that my chest was tight

preaches a Christmas message

and narrow, and my head was heavy as lead, while drops of sweat pressed out of my forehead. Down in the audience the people sat and stared, soon questioning, soon pitying and disappointed, until one after another got up and left, while I stood there dumb and terrified and wiped sweat as if it was Independence Day and not Second Day Christmas.

We were awakened by the host, who came with coffee and

Julekake. "Anderson, who will drive you to Skibtvedt, is already here," he said. "But he is always out early, so you have time to get dressed, eat breakfast and get there in good time before the bell for the service rings."

Never has a drop of coffee in the early morning tasted better. As soon as my friend had dressed he went downstairs. I first had to glance at the notes I

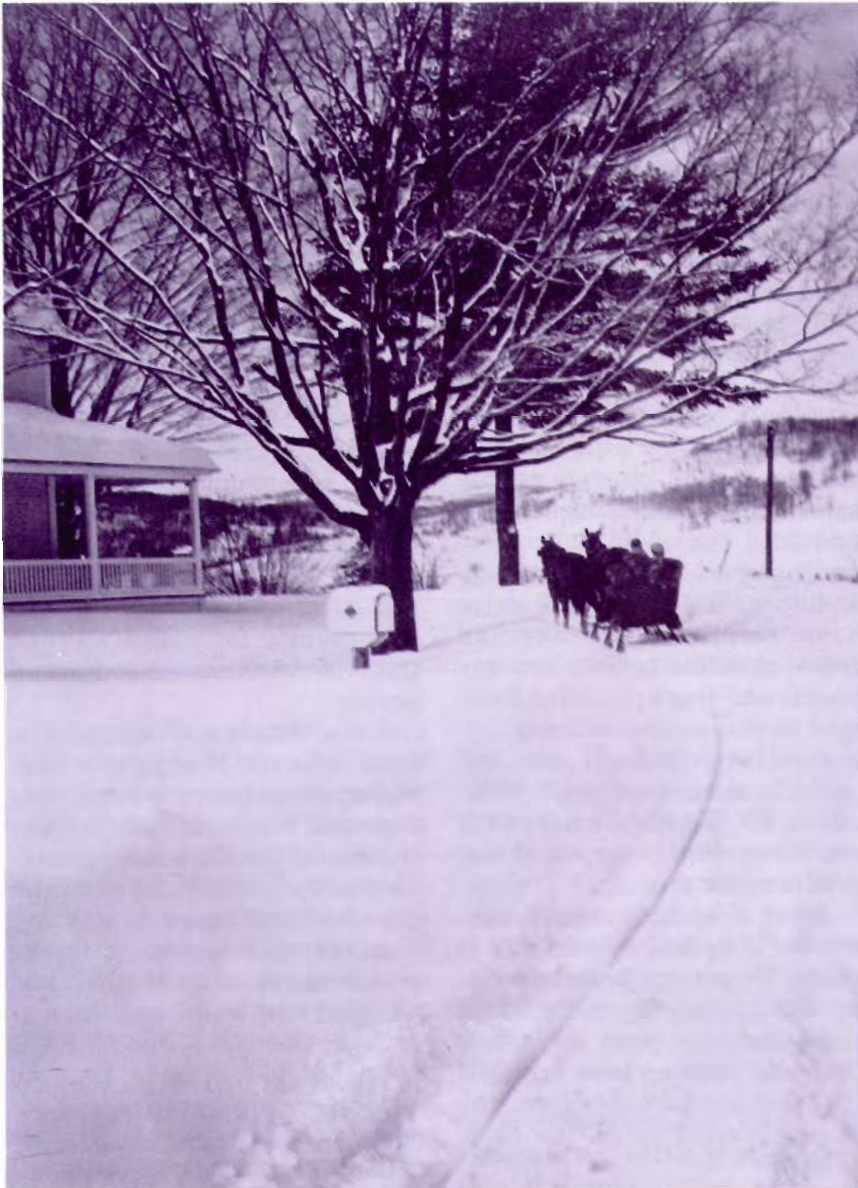
— T. O. Burntvedt
from *Juleboken*.
translated from Norwegian by
Rev. Raynard Huglen
Newfolden, Minnesota

had put down on the day's text. How miserably poor and empty they seemed to me! Certainly I had heard and read about the tramp who cooked soup from a nail, but I wasn't optimistic enough to believe that there could be a sermon from these dry sticks I had put down as a design.

Downstairs the breakfast table was set. The folks introduced me to Anderson, a tall, lean and sober man, who, with a firm handshake and warm words, assured me that "it was good and pleasant for brethren to dwell together." I did not have any desire to "dwell together" with anyone, but I attempted as well as I could to keep my spirits up.

After breakfast we put on our traveling clothes. Anderson had a fur cap, fur coat and fur mittens. Einar was also warmly dressed. My coat was thinner and there was almost no warmth in my stiff hat. I got to sit between the other two and we tucked ourselves in a thick fur robe. Soon the horses trotted forward. The road was fine for sleighing. But it had gotten very cold after the snow ended.

Our driver was in good spirits. He sat and hummed, "O that I could my Jesus praise." All of a sudden he quit the humming and assured us "how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together." One time he also added, "It is as the good oil upon the head which flows down upon the beard, Aaron's beard; it flows down on the hem of his garment." But neither the oil nor Aaron's
(continued on next page)



Religious News Service photo.

STUDENT PREACHES—

beard had any good effect on me. It is best not to say what I was thinking.

At last we arrived. The little church was well warmed up and it was more than half full of people. Because I wasn't yet a theological student, we omitted the usual liturgy. That which really troubled me the most besides the preaching was that the service should last a whole hour. Otherwise the farmers would think it wasn't worth it to harness up the horses and drive several English miles to church. People didn't know about "streamlined" services in those days. Therefore, I had chosen hymns with many verses and we sang them all. Einar and I also sang a duet and Einar led in prayer and read the Epistle text and we recited the Apostles' Confession of Faith.

As we sang the last verse of the pulpit hymn and I moved with heavy steps up the stairs to the pulpit, my friend tugged a leg of my trousers and whispered in my ear, "Tell some stories and then you will lengthen the sermon."

I didn't doubt that my friend's advice was well meant. It was his last chance to help me before I launched out on the great deep. But his words unsettled me. I couldn't ignore them. They pressed themselves forward in my thinking both when I prayed and when I read the text. Involuntarily I began to search for stories. I could remember only two. I had told them at a school festival in South Dakota over two years before. But they didn't really fit with the text and what I had to say. But before I was finished with the prayer and reading of the day's text, I had decided to weave them into the sermon in one place or another. Woven in they were, but I had a painful feeling that they took away from the sermon and that some of what I had most wanted to say was

lost, even if the sermon lasted about half an hour.

I went down from the pulpit numbed by a new feeling. Before I had thought too much about myself, what I should say, how to say it and that I could make it last half an hour. Now the thought stung me with a painful ache that the church people hadn't received anything. In snow and cold they had set out to receive a good Christmas message and now they would soon drive home emptier than they had come. Anxiously I asked my friend, who was acquainted locally, if there was any believing layman in the gathering I could call on for a testimony. Yes, I could call on Mr. Glende. He was one of the oldest, highly respected and good to speak.

After a hymn I asked that brother if he had a testimony to share. He got up, looked over to the choir entry, where my friend and I had our places, and asked, "Has any meeting been arranged for the students before the evening meeting at the town church?"

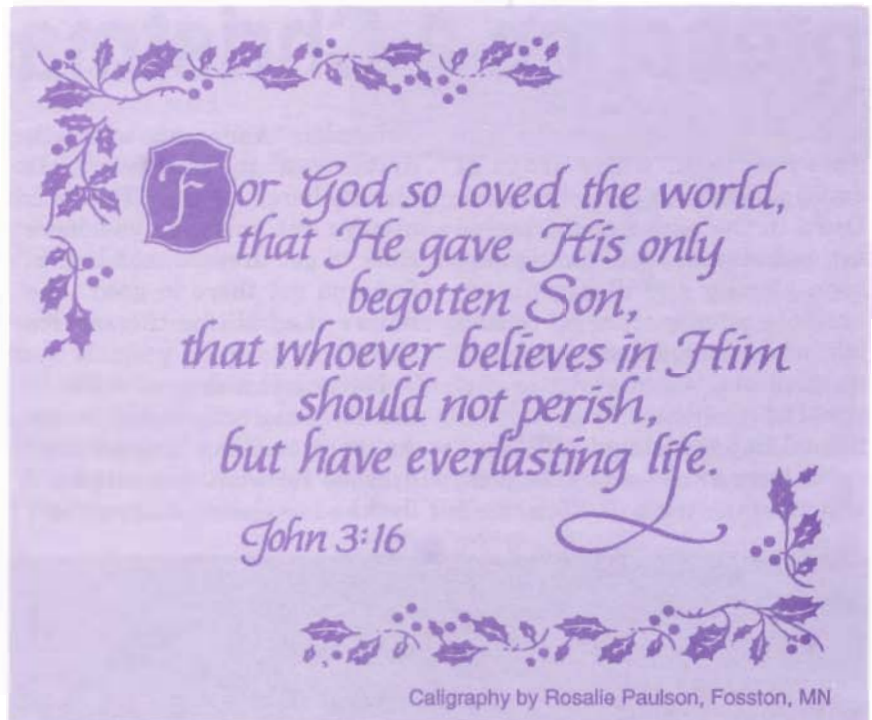
"No," I answered.

So he continued, "We have had

it so wonderful in church this morning that I feel we should gather for edification after dinner also. We must make use of the students while we have them." An older woman stood up and said that we were heartily welcome to her home. She added that with open doors in both rooms there would be enough space. And so the audience was encouraged to be present for the fellowship at 3 o'clock. The student would speak and sing and there would be opportunity for others to take part in testimony, song and prayer.

Late Monday afternoon the train came and Hompland with it. Never, either before or later, have I greeted him with such joy. For the rest of the Christmas holiday he was the pastor's assistant. He preached and spoke at services, festivals and meetings in the parish churches. I was a thankful and glad song leader and singer.

(Thorvald Olsen Burntvedt, 1888-1960, did attend Augsburg Seminary later, being ordained in 1915. From 1930-58, he served as president of the Lutheran Free Church.)



Why one lady looks forward to taking a break from a busy holiday schedule for the Christmas Eve candlelight service.

A time set apart

—by Ruth Pohll
Spencer Creek Lutheran Church
Eugene, Oregon

The holiday season approaches. We look forward to it and plan far in advance the activities, gifts, decorations, foods and the like so as to assure a truly festive and happy time for our loved ones. Do you ever feel the uncomfortable pangs of guilt pricking you when the hours of the day (and night) are so full of holiday preparations that the true meaning of Christmas gets pushed to the back burner? Oh, how our Lord must be waiting for us to slow down and look up! Christmas is not just another holiday decreed by man. It is a holy time to glorify and thank God for sending His Son to earth to be our Savior. But we get so busy!

The 11:00 p.m. hour on Christmas Eve at Spencer Creek Lutheran Church is that gift of God when families, fellow parishioners, neighbors, friends and visitors come together for the Christmas Eve candlelight service. This time is truly a haven from the commercialized bombardment of frenzied activity and the concern for getting it all "just right." Our beautifully decorated church shines as a beacon in the dark night, just as the One we worship shines as a beacon of hope in a dark world.

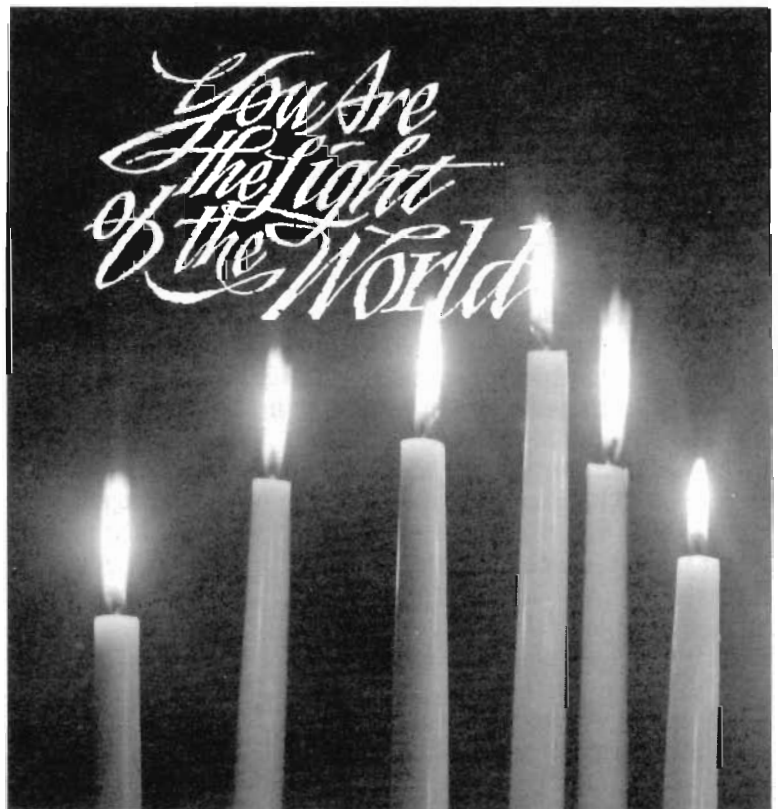
Many who come that night are living in darkness, not knowing Jesus as their Savior. They hear the good news that light has come into the world.

The church has a warm glow that evening, not only from all the candles but also from the greetings and smiles as we celebrate the birth of Christ Jesus. This is a special time that we have come to love and depend upon. It is an opportunity to worship in the midst of the clamor of the world around us.

Our children are now adults and some have children of their own. I am so thankful that the Christmas Eve candlelight service has been a central part of our family Christmas each year and has become a part of their tradition as they have matured from sleepy kids to grownups. It is an important time, set aside to give thanks, worship together

and celebrate the real meaning of Christmas: the birthday of our Savior and King, Jesus Christ.

The Christmas carols are rich with meaning and the message is one we love to hear over and over again. When we have each had our candle lit and then lighted our neighbor's candle, the overhead lights are extinguished and we sing *Silent Night* together. It is a spiritually moving time, and young and old are enraptured. We are now equipped to move on into Christmas Day and whatever else God has in store for us in the days ahead. Light has come into the world and we need not walk in darkness ever again.





God's answer to our fear

— Lydia McCarlson
Tabor Lutheran
Webster, South Dakota

It was a mild winter evening. The moon was shining brightly and the star-lit heavens were as splendid as ever. The shepherds watching their flocks on the hillside looked down at the peaceful town of Bethlehem as they stood guard over their sheep. In the silence one could occasionally hear the bleating of a lamb which had strayed from his mother.

Then suddenly an angel appeared. The shepherds were frightened, but the angel reassured them, "Don't be afraid."

Jesus Himself would later say to His disciples, "Fear not, little flock." The Lord God says, "Fear not, for I am with thee." As I think of the shepherd's story, my thoughts turn to "fear." What do we fear the most? I went to my family and asked, "What are you

afraid of? And what is your reassurance of that fear?"

One grandson and his friend said, "As we stood by the coffin of our dear friend, our hearts were heavy at his untimely death. Later we talked about our fears of being tempted by the devil and his devious ways. But if we love the Lord and believe on Him, He will provide a way of escape. First Corinthians 10:13 tells us we will not be tempted beyond what we can bear with the strength which God provides. In the Lord's Prayer we pray, 'Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.' We need to ask for help to say no."

A little great-grandson said, "I'm afraid of dogs and animals."

Those gifts we give

— Irene Gilbertson
Bethel Lutheran
Frontier, Saskatchewan

The giving of gifts started when Jesus was born in Bethlehem to be our Savior. The songwriter says, "God sent his Son, He called Him Jesus." The gift is described in II Corinthians 9:15 as one with which nothing can compare: "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift."

It says in Matthew 2:11-12 the wisemen "on coming to the house they saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh." To me, these gifts show an outpouring of love — from God the Father and to Jesus, His Son.

I expect all of us grew up with the tradition of giving gifts to family and friends. We hopefully give because we love them and want to give; but I am sure

But his mother reassured him that God knows his fears. She read to him about Daniel and the lions' den and how God protected Daniel.

Our 10-year-old said, "One day last summer it rained and rained. The streets were flooding and I said to Mom, 'Maybe God will send another flood - like Noah and the Ark.'" "No," his mother answered, "God promised never to send another flood on earth. To prove it He sent a rainbow. Haven't you ever seen it?" He



there are some gifts given out of obligation.

We hear people saying "nobody needs anything" which of course is true in some cases. But we must always remember we have people in our own communities who need us to care enough so that they can have food on the table and clothes to wear.

We also have a need to give to those we love; it makes us happy to do so. I find myself listening to comments during the year of what people would like or need and that helps make shopping more fun. Most of us would admit we enjoy getting gifts from those we love. They do not have to be big or expensive. It is amazing how others pick up on our wishes

in their gifts. It shows a special communication, a caring and love.

Webster's dictionary says that "a gift is something voluntarily transferred by one person to another without compensation." In Matthew 10:8 we read, "Freely you have received, freely give." Proverbs 22:9 reminds us, "A generous man will himself be blessed." And II Corinthians 9:7 says, "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

We must have the right reason to give gifts. Giving is not to gain friends and buy love. "He will accept no recompense, nor will he be appeased though you give many gifts" (Proverbs 6:35, NKJV). Later in Proverbs we are told "everyone is a friend of a man who gives gifts" (19:6b).

One gift in particular, spoke to my heart. It was absolutely unexpected. A lady I know (we never exchanged gifts) gave me a gift of earrings attached to a lovely note. I knew money was scarce in their family, but what a blessing that gift was to me! As hard as it may be, we have to learn at those times to say "thank you" and let them have the joy of giving and not think, "Oh, now I must give her something."

Many people, aware of the

need for Scriptures where they have no Bibles to read, give Gideon Bibles to honor their friends. This is a special and well-received gift. Let's teach our young people and even the very young, the right attitude and the way to shop for gifts.

Throughout this season, stores and media would entice us into buying the expensive "in" thing. It is not just the children who are lured into these desires, but adults as well. Too often we slip into a frenzy of excitement and buying that blows the budget and the credit card. Our happiness does not depend on those things we cannot afford to buy. Even if we can afford them, is it good stewardship? Will our children or family love us more? I think not.

This is one season that features the world's materialism. We have to stop and remind ourselves of the real meaning of Christmas. It is a celebration of Jesus' birth! He would want us to give to those truly in need and out of love to our family and friends. Spending ourselves into debt is not letting the love of Jesus be seen in us.

We can never hope to compare with God's most perfect gift. But we can keep the love and joy and ask God to lead us in our gift giving.



admitted he had and would likely see it again soon.

Our teenager confessed that his biggest fear was that of being found out. "I try to hide or cover up but my parents find out. It's just little things but Mom says, 'In the Bible it tells that Adam and Eve tried to conceal the truth but the Lord knew and they were punished.'"

The children were singing, "Give me oil in my lamp ...," yet life at college had led her away from the Lord and church. Could

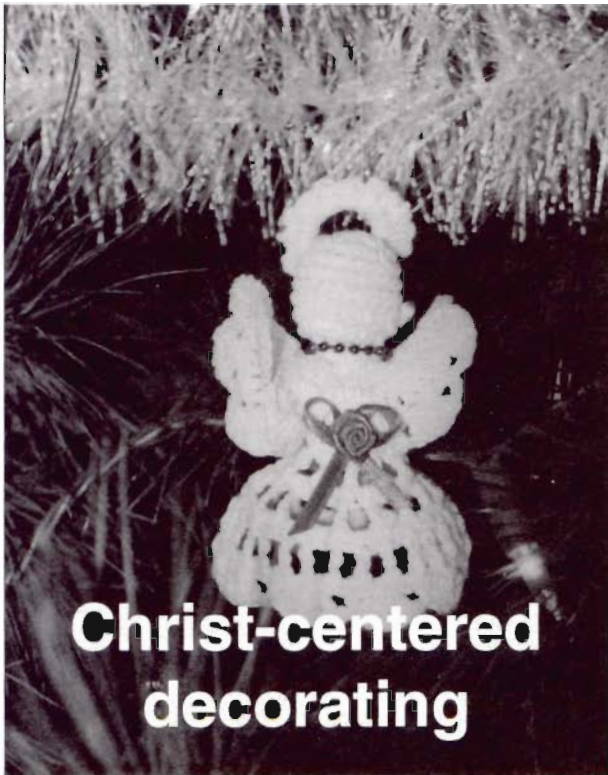
this be happening to her? A fear crept in and she realized her need to make room again for church and God "so that there would be oil in my lamp when Jesus comes."

Farmers were facing results of heavy rains and cold weather and the crop outlook was not good. Our son's biggest fear was no crop and yet big bills. I told him, "Have faith like a tiny mustard seed. You till the soil and plant, but the miracles of God produces the harvest. He will provide for

you. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you."

Let's not be afraid to run as the shepherds did on that first Christmas night to tell others that Christ has come. He came to save us from our sins. Share that joyful Christmas message throughout the year. Some day if we are faithful, we too, like the shepherds will see Jesus in all of His glory and beauty. May this be our Christmas story. "Fear not, for I am with you."





Christ-centered decorating

— Kathie Klenner
Salem and Immanuel
Lutheran Parish
Freeman, South Dakota

I have many fond memories of Christmases past. Christmas Day at Grandma and Granddad's house was filled with the smell of turkey baking, the sound of ice cream being made and the sight of popcorn balls and rosettes. But the centerpiece of their home to me was their little Christmas tree decorated with ornaments. Mom's rattle, my uncle's baby spoon, a cousin's first toy and many more each carefully labeled by Grandma with names and dates.

Decorations for Christmas in your home tell guests where you have put your focus. Our decorations need to be Christ-centered. The reason for Christmas is Jesus' birth, not Santa Claus and his reindeer.

My most precious decoration is a stable made by my dad and the nativity set painted by Mom given to my husband, Mike and I when we were first married. Dad is no longer living so it is a good time to share with the children memories of their grandfather. When all the pieces have been placed in the crèche, we add straw day by day — one piece of straw for each kindness done. By Christmas, baby Jesus has a soft bed of hay and a lesson has been learned. "Be ye kind one to

another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Christmas decorations need not be expensive. Creative, homemade gifts from the heart are meaningful. We have an old brass angel chime that fascinates the children when the candles are lit and the chimes start spinning. Mike found this at an estate sale. We also have made candles by melting old candle stubs and putting them in molds. If birch logs are available in your area, they make beautiful candle center-

Where did Christmas



Christmas trees seem to have their origins in the ancient celebrations of Saturnalia. The Romans decorated their temples with greenery and candles. Roman soldiers conquering the British Isles found Druids who worshiped mistletoe and Saxons who used holly and ivy in religious ceremonies. All those things found their way into Christmas customs.

Interestingly, however, the first person to have lighted a Christmas tree may have been Martin Luther, father of the Reformation. He introduced

pieces. Drill holes in the top for candles and place fresh greenery and pine cones around it. Pine cones make beautiful wreaths and look pretty just simply put in a basket. Of course there are the live plants that add so much.

I enjoy making many of the gifts we give and the decorations we use. Needlepoint canvas is a good medium for proclaiming Christ's birth. Angels are popular today and a good reminder of the angels heralding the good news.

May the light that was sent in Jesus shine through our homes. There is so much commercialism brought into Christmas today that we have to be careful not to warm up to those attitudes. Revelation 3:16 warns us not to become "lukewarm." We can become exhausted and broke if we get caught up in the tinsel and glitter.

When our family lived in Michigan, we could walk out in the back field and cut down our own tree. Pulling the tree home on a toboggan through the snow was a special event for our oldest son, Ryan.

When we put up our tree it is a special time. Christmas carols play, special snacks are enjoyed while we share the memories of the ornaments being placed on the tree. Our tree is covered with our childhood ornaments and those of our children. I have followed my grandma's tradition and labeled each one.

Advent calendars and candles help us focus on the Lord's birth. Smaller children enjoy opening a small window on the calendar every day. These can be handmade by parents or older children by using poster board and drawing pictures behind each cut-out window. An advent wreath is a good focal point for family devotions during the Christmas season.

Christmas is an opportune time to build family traditions and togetherness. What memories are we making for our children and our grandchildren? Do they have eternal value? By Christ-centered decorating for the holidays we can instill in them the great love the Father had for us in sending us Jesus.



"... we can instill in them the great love the Father had for us in sending us Jesus."

trees come from?

the practice of putting candles on trees to celebrate Christmas, citing Isaiah 60:13 as biblical authority for the practice: "The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the juniper, the box tree, and the cypress together, to beautify the place of My sanctuary; and I shall make the place of My feet glorious."

— John F. MacArthur, Jr.
God with us: The Miracle of Christmas
(Zondervan Publishing House, 1989)





Moving on at Christmas

— Rev. Todd and Barb Schierkolk
AFLC missionaries to Mexico

It is beginning to look a lot like Christmas — except at our house. Our Christmas decorations are in box No. 41 and the artificial tree we bought last year is in storage as well. Decorating our home has been a special time for us in the past because of the family traditions as well as the joy of seeing our little girls' eyes wide with delight and the sense of expectation awaiting the celebration of Christ's first coming. But this year the decorations are staying in the box. Our graduation from language school in Texas is a week before Christmas and we'll be packing up and pulling out.

Our time here in the Rio Grande Valley learning Spanish has gone by quickly. We were welcomed with a blast of heat and humidity that made us think we had mistakenly gone to Death Valley. In our new apartment Barb was immediately reacquainted with a friend from her days growing up in Australia. The gecko lizard, which Rachel named Curious George, and we began trying to make an uneasy peace with the cockroaches among us. But all of that was tempered by the gracious fellow missionaries who helped us move in, the playground outside our back door and the Gulf of Mexico being within reasonable driving distance for a desperately needed swim.

One of our prayer requests had

been that we would be able to start in the middle of the language course because of our prior Spanish studies. We were excited and thankful when the dean of the school said that we could indeed skip the first semester.

Life in language school was eased greatly by Todd's sister, Katrina, who came along to help us with our girls. She willingly shared a room with Rachel and Megan, which, of course, included listening to their nighttime cries and sharing her meager space with toys, dolls, and stuffed animals. Katrina also became the campus seamstress mending clothes, hemming pants and sewing dresses to meet the needs of other missionaries. We will always be grateful for her willingness to be here with us during these months and will miss her very much when she returns home.

During our time in school we have been able to help with a kids' club on the Mexican side of the border in the city of Raynosa. Todd appreciated the opportunities to become more accustomed to crossing the border and practicing Spanish with children who seem to speak a mile an minute.

During the summer months we all attended a mission church in Mexico and our little "toe heads" were introduced to the wonder people have of seeing their blonde

hair. Rachel has become a little more comfortable with kids touching her hair as she tried to follow her blonde mommy's example.

As we've improved in our Spanish, we have also realized the inevitable times of embarrassing offense in saying something we didn't intend to say — like offering someone a "gallina" (chicken) instead of a "galleta" (cookie), or worse. However, we have been reminded on numerous occasions that love not only covers a multitude of sins but also a multitude of language blunders.

So we have been renewed in our need to pray for more love. We pray that it would be shown by us and seen by the people among whom we live in Mexico, and that ultimately we could point the way to the greatest love of all which made its appearance at Christmas. For God so loved the world that He gave His Son.

Christmas is not in box #41. And it isn't in white snow or chestnut roasting on an open fire or even in being with family. We'll miss putting decorations up this year. It isn't going to look very much like Christmas at our house. But in our hearts we are going to kneel once again at the manger and adore the Savior of the world.

Feliz Navidad.



Christmas surprises

I loved that Christmas ornament. It was a star on top of the tree at my home church each Christmas when I was growing up. Its bright, colored lights blinked, but not in a regular pattern. I never could figure out which light would blink next. It's not that I didn't spend time trying. Minutes that should have been spent paying attention to the service were spent looking at that star, mesmerized.

That star was not beloved by all. Some hated it and considered it the most irritating ornament they had ever seen. They conspired to hide it, and it has never been seen since. While it seemed tragic to me, it was maybe for the best for those like myself who are easily distracted.

That star was full of surprises. A person never knew what light would be the next one to shine bright. It seemed like a fitting way for a Christmas ornament to act because Christmas is all about surprises.

Even though it had been foretold by the prophets, who really expected the Messiah to show up in a barn in Bethlehem? A virgin to give birth? The King of Kings to come as a baby? His resting place to be a place where animals eat? Cared for by two rather

ordinary people? No-name shepherds the first ones to hear the news? To the human mind the birth of Christ is nothing if not a surprise.

The typical human king makes a grand entrance. He expects luxury. He demands the finest of everything. That is how most kings come. That is not how our King came.

He "came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10, NIV). He "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45, NIV). The Lord of the universe came to die for your sins and for mine. The greatest of imaginations could not have dreamed of that.

The best surprise at Christmas is not the lights on the tree or the packages under it. The most incredible gift is the One who was born in Bethlehem and hung on the tree at Calvary. Jesus and the life He offers is the most wonderful gift any of us can ever receive.

May we each be amazed anew and struck with awe this Christmas at the love of God that came to the manger, went to the cross and rose again from the dead and wants to fill each one of our hearts.

Why?

Much of what we do at Christmas generates the question "why." Why do we keep the traditions we do? Why do we keep doing these same activities? Why do we decorate in such a manner? Why do we eat lutefisk and why do I even enjoy it?

Traditions can be a wonderful thing. Christmas is a time when they are often in abundance. Many of them should be maintained. Along with maintaining them, however, the "why" questions need to be addressed. "Because we have always done it this way" is generally not a sufficient answer.

Many of the traditions we enjoy at Christmas began for a reason and with a specific purpose in mind. That reason should be passed down along with the tradition. A wonderful teaching tool then exists. Connections with previous generations can be established. Fond memories can be enjoyed.

The Bible urges us to remember those who have gone before us. We are to learn from their lives and honor them and their memory. Keeping traditions can be a helpful way of doing that. For those of us blessed with ancestors who followed Jesus, it can also be a way of remembering their faith in Christ and love for family.

We are also called in Scripture to have a concern for the generations that will follow after us. We are

not simply to live for ourselves and the here and now. Thought must be given to what example is being set, what legacy is being left for those who will be walking this earth next.

In Exodus 12 the Lord told the Israelites to celebrate the Passover and commemorate what He did in sparing them and bringing them out of Egypt. They are to expect their children to ask, "What does this ceremony mean to you?" (Exodus 12:26, NIV). The story of God's great work is then to be shared. The ceremony, the tradition was a tool for teaching.

We have much to teach at Christmas, much good news to share. Let us seek ways of using traditions to do just that.

One "why" question for which human reason does not have a sufficient answer is why does God so love us that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but shall have everlasting life? The answer is not found in what we have done, do or will do. He did not come because we are full of goodness that makes us deserving, but because He is full of love and grace.

May you and your family enjoy traditions and create new memories this Christmas. May the incredible story of Jesus astound you and thrill you once again.

SOMETHING TO SHARE

The big announcement

The other day I overheard a bubbling father talking on the seminary pay-phone. I couldn't help but notice, he was simply beaming as he told about the bouncing baby boy: "He's so cute! ... He looks just like me!"

It brought back warm memories. There's something extra-special about a birth announcement. When my three sons were born, I cried and laughed all at the same time. I couldn't wait to start calling our families. Even the phone company was thrilled.

Speaking of big announcements, here is the ultimate: Luke 2:11 proclaims the greatest birth announcement ever sent! It came long distance — person to person — all the way from heaven to earth. The angel "operator" announced, "Today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Of course, God could have deployed ten thousand angels to get the message out. But that was not His plan. So whom, of all the people on this earth, would God choose to be first to receive the big announcement? Kings and rulers? The priests on duty in Jerusalem?

(If we didn't know the story so well, the answer would probably shock our Christmas socks off!) Imagine! God chose a few lonely shepherds to be honored above all other people

that first Christmas night.

The innkeeper and his house full of guests, only a stone's throw away from the manger, were totally oblivious to the fact that the greatest event in history was taking place. Yet out in the darkness of the night, common shepherds were suddenly overwhelmed by the glory of the Lord blazing around them.

God chose men that everyone else seemed to ignore — men who were willing to drop everything in order to see Christ: "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us."

What if these men had not been doers of the Word? What if they had not gone straight to Bethlehem that night? Think of the many today who hear the same announcement, yet never make their way to meet the living Christ! How about you? Are you willing to leave everything behind in order to see Jesus?

Look again. God chose men who were not ashamed to pass the good news on to others. Luke 2:17 says, "And when they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds."

Amazing! These humble shepherds were God's first preachers of the latest and greatest news to hit the planet. Not one of them was ordained. If it were educated men that God wanted, the angel surely could have gone to Jerusalem and awakened the priests with the big announcement. (Do you suppose they would have crawled back under the covers and settled for a press conference the next day?)

The point is that God is not a respecter of persons. He chose Mary Magdalene to be the first witness of Christ's resurrection. And a fine witness she was. Our Lord is still searching out those whom He can use to pass the good news along to others. Ambassadors are still needed to get the Word out.

Here's the final characteristic we see in the shepherds: God chose men who were willing to give Him glory and praise for all that they had received. Their lives were forever changed. And the Father was pleased.

P.S. By the way, have you sent out any "birth announcements" this year? After 2,000 years the message remains the same: There has been born for you a Savior ... That's something to share!

— Rev. Jerry Moan
AFLC Schools
Minneapolis, Minnesota