

THE LUTHERAN
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Triumph of the Cross

THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

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AN ENCOURAGING WORD

Coming to our senses

“**H**ow sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth” (Psalm 119:103).

I just finished peeling and eating an orange. As my fingers dug into the thick rind, a pungent, bittersweet aroma spread into the air. I could feel saliva flowing around my tongue and through my teeth as I anticipated the first bite. The skin of the orange momentarily resisted my teeth until finally breaking and spurting juice in all directions. I noticed the sweetness first, then a hint of sourness. The flavors faded as I chewed. The texture of the pulp and skin also changed as I prepared to swallow. But I didn't want to swallow. I wanted to savor the experience as long as I could.

Do you appreciate your taste buds? We have about 10,000 of them, compared to rabbits with 17,000 and cows with 25,000 (grass must taste better than I think). As we get older, the number of taste buds decreases. We taste sweet things at the tip of the tongue; bitter things at the back; sour things at the sides; and salty things spread over the surface, but mainly up front. How we taste things can be as individual as our fingerprints.

Consider how the disciples individually tasted this moment with the Savior: “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to His disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’ Then He took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Matthew 26:26-28). That night in the upper room, each disciple tasted for himself all that Jesus had to offer.

What an intimate moment that must have been.

Taste is an intimate sense. We cannot taste things at a distance. Just as the disciples spent a lot of time up close with Jesus, we, too, must learn to abide in Him, up close and personal, not from a distance. Later that same evening, Jesus spoke more clearly about abiding in Him. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

While spiritual disciplines, such as Bible reading and prayer, are essential to abiding in Christ, they alone do not define your relationship with God. You can do those things for years and not be truly abiding in Him. What is happening on the inside is what matters. Spending 15 minutes in the morning with Jesus is great. Spending all day in His presence is abiding. In order to taste something, it must enter your body. In order to taste of Jesus, He must enter your being.

David invites us to “taste and see that the Lord is good ...” (Psalm 34:8). Jesus, Himself, extends the same invitation. “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in Me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35). Jesus wants to share His life with you. Will you share yours with Him? Abide in your Savior ... and savor the taste.



— Paul Kneeland
Youth Pastor
Faith & Stillwater
Free Lutheran
Kalispell, Mont.

SOUND BITES

I have attended many evangelical worship services in which the underlying drama of Christ's work has not been central and clear. ... Often the service tells me what I have to do, rather than celebrating what Christ has done.

— *Robert Webber*

The death of Christ is the death of sin, and His resurrection is the life of righteousness, because through His death He has made satisfaction for sin, and through His resurrection He has brought us righteousness. And thus His death not only signifies but actually effects the remission of sin as a most sufficient satisfaction.

— *Martin Luther*

Where one in the past had a sense of loss, loneliness, and emptiness, the Christian now has hope by the light from the empty tomb of Jesus. And hope pierces the gloom of death and reveals life in the realm of the resurrection.

— *H. E. Wisloff*

Churches can become beehives of busy Christians doing all kinds of church work. But the church becomes the Church only when its primary work is to preach the Good News that Christ is alive.

— *Calvin Miller*

Man's maker was made man that He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His mother's breast; that the Bread might hunger, the Fountain thirst, the Light sleep, the Way be tired on its journey; that Truth might be accused of false witnesses, the Teacher be beaten with whips, the Fountain be suspended on wood; that Strength might grow weak; that the Healer might be wounded; that Life might die.

— *Augustine*

Lenten services have allowed me to see Jesus more fully as my Savior. He is the only invincible protection for this life and eternity, my Prince of Peace and my God. Hallelujah! “He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

As a child, I did not know Jesus, but believed in God and expected physical protection. Mom and Dad rarely verbalized, “I love you.” Instead, we heard, “Don’t fall down the stairs,” or, “Keep your hands away from the car door.” Their desire to protect us communicated caring. I didn’t understand then that it is sin that could seriously hurt me and others I love. The parental protection I expected may not always be there. But God is always there in the midst of hurts, wanting to bring peace and healing in Jesus.

The Lord Jesus is not removed from understanding pain and suffering. He was stripped, beaten and hung naked on the cross. The depth of His suffering was

as we feed on Jesus, the living Word?

God’s Word can heal emotional wounds. After coming to Christ and receiving eternal life, Lenten messages brought peace to me. At Maranatha Free Lutheran, Glyn-don, Minn., I caught a glimpse of this being a time of preparation before Easter. The opportunity to meditate ahead of time on Lenten themes brings additional meaning to the messages. Symbolic ceremonies during Lent remind us of the wondrous work of the Lord to forgive sin. There is freedom in repentance, receiving forgiveness from God and the chance to offer forgiveness to others.

During my troubled teen years, my parents took me to a crusade. The speakers said counselors were available to talk with those who came forward to accept Christ. I came forward, not for Christ, but for counseling. The counselor filled out my name on a piece of paper and sent me back to my non-Christian parents. I was embarrassed by the silence; emotional healing didn’t happen. Emotional wounds are healed at the cross as we see Jesus’ response to trials. Christ and the cross cannot be separated from counseling. The “old rugged cross, stained with

How **LENT** can bring you

beyond any physical suffering one can endure, with the weight of the world’s sin added to repeated trials. Jesus was flogged to near death, pierced with a sword thrust into His side and died by suffocation as the weight of His own physical body hung on the cross.

The unconditional love of Christ is victorious over the sins of men. Jesus was crucified and rose again so that we might live.

I wrestled with inadequate ways of responding to Christian love and to God’s love in Christ. My own sin was so evident that I needed to repent. On April 6, 1987, the Lord presented me with the option of continuing to live in fear without assurance (as I had for 29 years), or to trust Jesus and live in peace, accepting the unconditional love He offered. II Corinthians 3:18 says, “We are being changed from one degree of glory to another, this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” I realized God would do the changing in me.

Prior to being born again, Lent meant little to me. Additional services on Wednesday evenings did not appeal to a busy family. I’d heard about giving up something for Lent, along with the tradition of eating fish on Fridays. Soup suppers are often served before Lenten services, making it easier for families to attend. Although suppers provide wonderful fellowship, does it matter if we eat soup or fish (or bread and water) as long

blood so divine” does have a wondrous attraction for me. He watched the guards gamble for His seamless robe. He gave his mother to another. He endured the betrayal of close friends and comrades. And He separated from His Father when taking our sin on Himself.

The wounds on Jesus’ hands and feet are beautiful to the Christian. When Christ has healed us, our scars also have beauty. Just as we should not repeatedly sin — and thus crucify Christ again — we do not want to reopen these old wounds. Regrettably, I’d done this more than a few times. Praise Jesus for His wonderful healing power! “We have been made holy by means of the offering up once for all of the body of Jesus Christ” (Hebrews 10:10).

Opportunities to hear testimonies of other Christians are often given during Lenten services. “They overcame him (Satan) by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony” (Revelation 12:11). Seeing the victory of Jesus in another’s life can encourage us. Attend Lenten services, hear God’s Word and listen for testimony. Look to the cross and beyond to the resurrection. There is power in Jesus’ wounds to heal lives.

— *Linda Nelson*
Medicine Lake Lutheran
Plymouth, Minn.



peace



Triumph of the Cross

News never hits us quite the same way when it is about us rather than someone else. We read or hear about the person killed in a tragic car accident across the state. They are someone we never heard of. We have twinges of sorrow for the wife and children who are left behind, but the story does not keep us from completing our work or getting on with what we want to do. How different if the doctor says to you, "You have two weeks to live." Or the person at the door reports, "Your daughter was hit by a drunk driver." Suddenly, everything else becomes unimportant and your whole being has one focus and one concern.

When we hear the news of the cross of Jesus, our reaction is quite the same. As long as the message is general or about somebody else, we pass it off. "The cross may provide others with nice religious experiences," we may think, "but it really has little to do with me."

Colossians 2:13-14, however, begins with pronouns that don't allow us to look at the cross as though it is news only for others. The personal pronoun, "you," tells me that what the cross is about is *me* along with a bunch of other individual persons. "When *you* were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of *your* flesh ..." is vital information concerning me. It is this fact that makes the cross a "stumbling block" or "foolishness" to many. "I may not be perfect," we tend to reply. "Certainly I am not dead because of what I do and who I am." When the cross is made personal, it is truly an offence.

But what about when my eyes are opened and I see that this news about me found in the cross is true? Then I need to hear the whole story. Then I have one focus and one concern. The cross, then, has a "wondrous attraction for me." The news of the cross is honest about who I am *and* is God's gracious provision to remedy my hopeless situation. The cross is God's complete remedy about which I want to hear over and over again. "Is there any part of my need that is left out or forgotten?" God holds the cross before me in this text fully explaining how through it, Jesus meets my need completely.

My need? Not that I am dying but that I am dead. Dead, not just because of what I have done, but

because of who I am by nature; because of my flesh. His provision? He made me alive with Jesus! How?

First, He forgave us *all* our transgressions. There is no act of law breaking we can find in our lives that God has not forgiven. There is no act of disobedience that Jesus did not willingly pay for by His suffering and death. By His death, our sin has been punished and our debt fully paid. God is just to forgive us our every sin.

Second, He took all the laws that accused us and canceled them. He actually put them to death on the cross. These laws stand opposed to us. They rightly accuse us. They say that not only am I guilty, but also deserving of death because of that guilt. But in Christ, those decrees are removed. There is nothing left of them to declare me guilty. There is nothing left of them to sentence me to death.

And finally, He has bound the one who constantly accuses us and desires our fall. He and his fellow rebels desire us to be theirs in their rebellion against the Most High God. What has Jesus done to these rulers and authorities through the cross? He has bound them. He has plundered their house. He has publicly displayed these foes as vanquished in His victory parade. He has made it clear that "God is for us. Who can be against us?"

In Colossians 2, Paul tells us how Christ has triumphed over death for us, he stops using the pronoun "you." The pronoun at this point changes to "us." He cannot hear this news as though it is just about someone else. As he tells us about what Jesus did for *us*, he knows that it is what Jesus did for *him*. This news hits home for him no matter how many times he hears it or tells it. This news draws Paul's attention; it becomes his only focus. After all, it's about how God brought him from death to life. Tell me friend, what does this news do to you?

— **Pastor Jon Wellumson**
Beaver Creek Free Lutheran
Tioga, N.D.
Emmanuel Free Lutheran
Williston, N.D.



And when you were dead •

**in your transgressions
and the uncircumcision
of your flesh, He made
you alive together with
Him, having forgiven us
all our transgressions,
having cancelled out
the certificate of debt
consisting of decrees
against us and which was
hostile to us; and He has
taken it out of the
way, having nailed it
to the cross.**

Colossians 2:13-14



A large, rustic wooden cross is the central focus, standing upright in a woven wicker basket. The basket is filled with numerous colorful Easter eggs in shades of yellow, light blue, pink, and pale green. Each egg is decorated with various patterns, including polka dots, stripes, and abstract shapes in contrasting colors. The basket is also filled with green artificial grass and several long, flowing ribbons in yellow, blue, and purple. In the foreground, the soft, out-of-focus petals of a white flower with a pink center are visible. The overall scene is bright and festive, with a clear religious theme.

MORE

THAN BUNNIES

As I drove into my driveway coming home for lunch, I spotted my next-door neighbor heading out his front door toward his car all dressed up in a shirt and tie.

"Mark!" I yelled out, "where are you going all dressed up?"

"I have a job interview," he replied.

Mark has been out of work for the past six months, and his unemployment is just about used up. He lives with his girlfriend, and together they have a 2-year-old girl. Judy and I have been building a friendship with them for the past year and enjoy them as neighbors since moving out to Colorado, and our daughters have enjoyed babysitting their 2-year-old girl. I walked over to his yard to get more information on this job possibility.

"I really need this job badly," Mark explained. "My benefits are just about out."

"Would you mind if I prayed that your interview goes well today," I asked politely.

"Prayer, or a rabbit's foot, whatever works for you," was his reply.

With that he got into his car and drove off. Mark and his girlfriend are typical unchurched people. After inviting them to our Easter service last year, which they attended, Mark gave us his views on Christianity and the church. Mark grew up in southern California and was taken to church by his parents. But when he went off to college, he became convinced that there was no such thing as God, embraced the theory of evolution and has kept his distance from the church ever since. Now he lives right next door to a pastor.

This is our mission field. These are the kind of people that need a saving relationship with Jesus, and this is whom Jesus sacrificed his precious blood for. But how do we break through to them?

To be quite honest, Mark and his girlfriend probably don't believe in the Easter bunny themselves, but they will make sure that their daughter only comes to view Easter as a time of eggs, chocolates and bunnies. Why? Why have unchurched people become so cynical about Jesus Christ and the resurrection and at the same time become silly with trivial things like teaching their children about Easter bunny folklore? It is because they, like countless millions of Americans, don't have a very positive view of the church.

Unfortunately, some in Christian circles have misinterpreted their cynical view of the church as proof that there is no interest in spiritual things.

But that is not true. There is a strong inner desire for a deeper spiritual connection on the part of many unchurched people, the problem is they have come to the conclusion that the church at the end of their block doesn't offer them what they are truly searching for. To many of them, church is a place that serves up religion and ritual but no real purpose or meaning for their lives. Yet, ironically at the same time, they are hungering for something spiritual and meaningful.


So how do we reach them with the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ? I don't offer a specific plan or program. Jesus did not have a specific program. But one thing Jesus did offer to those who were spiritually lost was to first love them. And they could sense it. I think about Zacchaeus, for example. Or the woman prostitute who anointed His feet with precious perfume, or the story of the prodigal son. In these examples, Jesus showed us that He sincerely values and loves people who are spiritually lost. He also stepped into their world. He related to the lost. If we seek to share the reality of Christ with those who embrace nothing more than an Easter bunny mentality, we must build credible relationships of trust and authenticity with today's spiritually lost.

As you read this, it's important that you don't merely agree with this in theory. Stop and ask yourself right now, "Who are my unchurched friends? Who do I spend quality time relating with who are still outside of God's grace?" I am not speaking about casual relationships we might have, but truly people who we love and demonstrate that love to on an ongoing basis. I am talking about people you would have over to your house and spend the entire evening with just because you enjoy being in their company. Today's spiritually lost need to see up close that your faith brings help, hope and meaning into your daily existence. The only way they will see that in you is to be with you up close. Not casually from a distance. It is in that personal context that the gospel can be shared and the hope that you have can be testified to.

A good place to begin is to ask God in prayer to bring one person into your life who is far from God, and then ask God to help you love, care for, accept and befriend them.

— **Pastor Jim Ritter**
Living Water Christian Church
Parker, Colo.





**Christ's death
and resurrection
are relevant
every Sunday**

Remember

Certainly the most holy, meaningful and important celebration in the Christian church is that of Easter. This is the pinnacle of Christian worship and marks the greatest miracle that had the deepest spiritual implications of all time — the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The wonder of this touches our hearts as nothing else can, and herein lies a main element of our faith that ties all believers together in one great hope for eternity, while giving us purpose for our present lives.

Nonetheless, there remains 51 other Sundays when we also worship the Lord. Usually, we do not consider and prepare for these times as much as we do on Easter. But every Sunday is or should be “Easter” for God’s people. And worship should reflect this.

Every Sunday is Easter because the doctrines of Christianity all connect with and hinge upon this one truth: Jesus rose from the dead. I Corinthians 15:17

explains: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.” The resurrection is that essential proof from God that the work of salvation is true and forgiveness is real for you and me. Titus 1:2 adds that all that we believe and know of the truth “rests upon the hope of eternal life” and therefore must be central to our worship.

This one doctrine provides the goal for every believer, since we all will someday face death. We come and worship our God because we believe Jesus when He says, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies” (John 11:25). Jesus’ redemption opens up immortality, so the goal of eternal life underlies all of our praise and adoration to God. Every Sunday is Easter because the risen Christ is an anchor for our souls (Hebrews 6:19). Paul wrote to the Galatian church (2:20), “The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the son of God.” We are fortified in our trust of God’s Son, who conquered all evil that daily wages warfare against our hearts. When we fail or when we are in need of some blessing, Romans 8:34 reminds us that “Jesus Christ ... who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is interceding for us.” As congregations, our souls in worship seek the face of a merciful and gracious Father, through Jesus, for cleansing and renewal.

Many of us attend Sunday worship services because

there we find encouragement, guidance and faith in our complicated and threatening world. Paul underwent great hardship and personal problems beyond anything we ever have, and he discovered that these things all have a purpose. He wrote: “But this happened that we might not rely upon ourselves, but on the God who raises the dead” (II Corinthians 1:9).

Our human condition is filled with weakness and matters beyond our ability to control. So often, worship includes asking God for help with our sins and burdens. If it were not for a focus on the resurrection of Jesus, however, our requests of God could easily become little different than that of the pagans who try selfishly to appease and coerce the false gods to help them through worship.

Easter surely is every Sunday in our worship of the Lord because the resurrection is a foundation of our faith and an anchor for our souls. Added to that, the living Christ is also the source of our hope. We all must

face the pains of the death of loved ones, but we do not have to “grieve like the rest of men who have no hope” (I Thessalonians 4:13). Instead, Jesus tells us: “Because I live, you also will live” (John 14:19b). By faith we often cling to this sweet declaration of life, and praise and glorify Him for it.

Peter praised God for the gift of “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead into an

inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you” (I Peter 1:3). Worship is an expression of that living hope carried with us from week to week until that moment we enter paradise, and our hope becomes fact.

When we give it some thought, every Sunday is Easter, for the resurrection underlies every part of our faith as Christians. Our worship reaffirms and reflects the solid attachment our souls have to the living Christ, for our hope for eternal life lies secure in and along with His life beyond the grave. Not only is it always appropriate to keep the message of Easter in what we say, think and do each Sunday, we cannot truly worship God without it.

— *Pastor Lyle Aadahl*
Zion Lutheran
Dexter, Minn.



Easter

Keeping the CROSS CENTRAL

The cross is at the center of the Bible. The Bible presents all of history, from the creation and beginnings of the universe, to the end of time, as we know it. Therefore, if the cross is the center of the Bible, it is also the center of history.

The cross stands over and against all other religions. No other religion, past or present, offers mankind anything like the cross. No other god ever conceived by the mind or spirit of man actually suffered and died for our sins. Only Jesus on the cross offers forgiveness of sins, salvation and eternal life.

Since the cross is so central in the Word of God and in human history, we should keep it in the center of our hearts and minds also. Martin Luther put the cross in the center of his coat of arms, signifying that it ought to be in the center of our hearts. What would it mean for us to keep the cross at the center of our lives?

First, we would see our own spiritual sickness. God considered it necessary to come to Earth and sacrifice Himself on the cross in the person of His only Son, in order to rescue us from sin and the power of the devil. That's pretty drastic. Our sinfulness is a sickness unto death. It took the cross to heal that. Without the cross, we are doomed and headed for everlasting death. Without the cross, we languish in wicked activities and thoughts, constant restlessness, failure and desperation to find meaning in life. With the cross, we find cleansing, victory over sins, peace with God, reconciliation with other people, satisfaction with life now and assurance of life in heaven because Jesus not only died, but also overcame death.

Second, we are helped to repentance. We need to repent. We cannot have the joy of forgiveness and healing from sin without repentance. Repentance is the key to unlocking forgiveness. Jesus' whole message is summarized when he said, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." Speaking His native language, Jesus no doubt used a word that meant, "turn around" or "turn back." To record it in Greek, the New Testament writers used a word that means, "change of mind." So the full meaning of repent is to turn to Jesus and change our mind. The change is that we are disgusted with our sin, sorry that we did it and now turn to Jesus who forgives, heals and saves.

Third, we draw ever closer to Jesus. This keeps us humble. The closer we walk with Him, the more we see the contrast between His perfection and our need for His goodness. We have none in ourselves. As long as we try to see goodness in ourselves, we are far from Jesus and the cross.

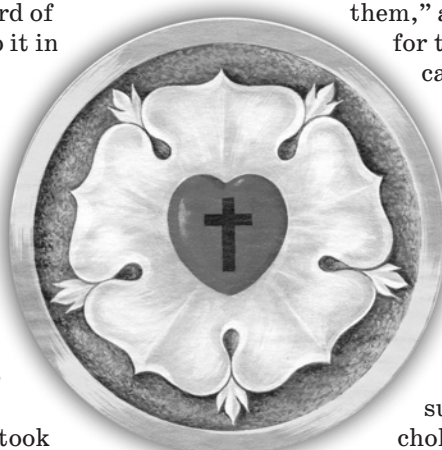
As long as we see ourselves as "good Christians," we can be of no help to the unsaved or lost. They will stay away from us and our churches, because we are self-righteous and have nothing to offer them. Only when we see ourselves as helpless sinners saved by the free grace of Jesus Christ and the cross, do we draw closer to Jesus. Out of deep gratitude for His pure and wonderful grace, we now have something to share with others: forgiveness.

Fourth, keeping the cross at the center means that we have an easier time forgiving other people. We remember our Lord's own words on the cross, "Father, forgive them," as they crucified Him. If He could do this for those who were murdering Him, surely we can forgive those who offend us. The inability to forgive is at the heart of most of our interpersonal problems. Remember Jesus on the cross, and forgive those who trespass against you, as you say that you will in the Lord's Prayer. It may not be easy, but it's possible, and it's a great way to free your own spirit and restore happy relationships.

With the cross at the center, we will be able to overcome suffering. Suffering may be physical, psychological, emotional or mental. We may be called upon to endure extreme hardships we have never known before. Part of overcoming suffering is the ability to endure it. Jesus willingly endured the suffering of the cross because He knew already the glory that was to be His and ours after the suffering was over. This vision of glory gave Him victory over suffering, even in the midst of it. As we live with the cross at the center of our lives, we share the fellowship of His suffering — and in that sharing we grow close to Him and are empowered to endure and overcome our own suffering.

Finally, we learn to reach out to others. With the cross at the center, we naturally have something of value to share with other people. With the cross, we have a joy that is evident in our countenance, our attitudes and our speech. We have a forgiving heart that renews within us the joy of salvation. With the cross, we know what it's like to be forgiven and cleansed from unrighteousness. The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, given to empower us to be witnesses for Him. With His gracious gift, how can we but speak of that which we have experienced? It's the power of the cross at the center of our lives.

— *Pastor J.R. Chandler*
Trinity Lutheran Church
Lockney, Texas





God of surprises

I love creative people. It amazes me to see the way their minds come at a problem from new angles in ways I could never imagine, and to see the beautiful and unique works they are able to produce. On the other hand, sometimes people who think out of my particular “box” bother me because they don’t say or do things the way I anticipate they will. Such surprises can be a bit upsetting. So it is with our Creator God, a God of surprises. There are times when His plans have confused or disappointed me. But in the end, His ways always accomplish their purposes.

The Creator of this vast and varied universe tends not to stay in the predictable little boxes into which we try to fit Him. His very birth as a king in a cave stable did not impress many of our race, nor did His humble walk and associations here on Earth. Oh, we liked His miracles all right, but what He said about loving our enemies and being a servant was a bit unexpected coming from a powerful Messiah. Finally, His humiliating and very human death on a cross alongside common criminals just didn’t fit our expectations for the King of the Jews.

When we read and meditate on the events leading up to the crucifixion, it is easy to see the disciples’ confusion and chagrin at Christ’s unexpected words and actions. I, too, have experienced some chagrin, confusion and disappointment in my walk with Christ, as I am sure you have, when He has not performed according to

my expectations. During this Lenten season, we, like the disciples, need our God of surprises to astonish us with His creative ways once again.

“... I will ... tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know” (Jeremiah 33:3).

Our God of surprises was not through yet. After that shocking death on the cross, no one could have imagined what happened next. Who could have predicted that Jesus wouldn’t stay dead? Furthermore, no one could have understood that this resurrection power would unleash a movement that would change the entire world and spread far beyond that small group of disciples. Is it possible for my faith to impact the world the way the faith of the first century Christians stormed the Roman world?

Each year during Lent, we who have known this message for years have a fresh opportunity to reflect on the seriousness of our own sin and the depth of our own need for a Savior. When the full reality of our sin sinks in, we can be set on fire by the amazing grace given to us so freely and unconditionally. It is then when we will begin to amaze the world

around us with Christ’s overflowing love. Did not even those skeptical Romans note: “How those Christians love each other!”

I like the thought of banishing the world’s preconceived ideas of narrow, colorless Christians by letting the dazzling hues of Christ’s love beam out through us to a watching world. I am intrigued by the possibilities of turning loose an army of Christians, empowered by life-changing grace on a world that so desperately needs to hear both their sinful

condition and God’s mercy extended to each one. The law and the gospel have never been more relevant to this rebellious, lost world. That old, old story is fresh and vibrantly alive each time a dead heart is resurrected by its power.

I’ll have to let that grace soak in for a

while before I can really live it out. What an exciting thought — what would happen if I drop my plans and let this creative God live and love through me any way He sees fit? Who knows? We serve a God of surprises.

— **Rose Carlson**
Bethel Free Lutheran
Grafton, N.D.

Carlson is the author of the 2002 WMF Bible Study “A Wise Woman Builds Her House.”

Always look for the window

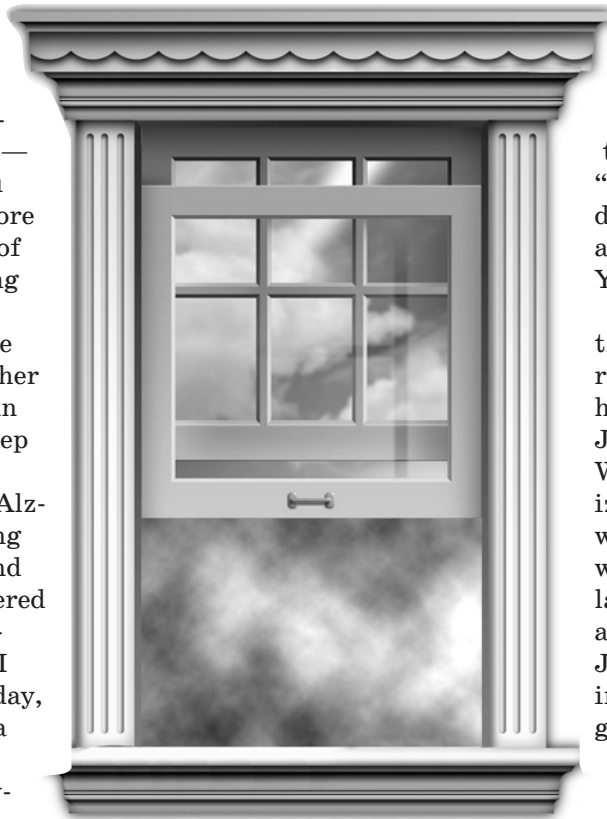
While in training for chaplaincy, I remember sitting in a class when the instructor said:

“Always, remember, look for the window, and quickly jump through the door, it may be a brief span of time.” The instructor was referring to work with institutional Alzheimer’s patients. Permit me to share with you an experience that changed my thinking — and life — forever. It will give you insight into why I feel we need more assisted living facilities and less of the jumping from home to nursing home — at least for some.

“She is getting more and more confused and is unable to stay in her farm home, but I can’t put mom in some place where she will just sleep all day or sit in some chair by her bed.” Liz moved into our special Alzheimer’s unit of the assisted living facility, and I was her chaplain and once-a-week cook. She often lingered near the piano, and the more confused she became the more often I would find her in that area. One day, I gently sat her down and placed a music book open in front of her. She sat for a long time, then slowly raised her hands to the keys. She had no idea that the hymnbook was in front of her, or that I was not her dad. She was much older than I, but she played. I began to take her with me for our brief service time in the Alzheimer’s area where she played various hymns and we sang. Time passed and the illness took its toll. Blank stares, little movement. I began to wonder if she knew how much I had grown to love her. At last, even when I knelt beside her or took her to the piano, there was only quietness and sometimes agitated movements. I seemed like a stranger,

not her dad, and I silently wondered what, if anything, registered. “Lord,” I prayed, “Liz is your child. Help me open the window and jump through the door, at least once more.”

Months went by. One day, a very



special little girl came to see me and we walked around as I showed her the wonderful family in our assisted living facility. As we passed Liz, I sensed that there was a slight hand movement, and this little girl stopped, knelt down and quietly said: “Hi, I’m Sally,” and began to tell Liz about her farm, school, etc. I didn’t have the heart to explain that Liz was beyond all that in her own dark world. Even Sally’s eyes seemed to have the “light.” “Oh, you

have a piano! I play piano, do you?”

Liz suddenly drew the child close and whispered, “Farm.”

“Oh,” said Sally, “you lived on a farm too?”

“Do,” came the whisper back.

Upon impulse, I took them to the piano bench, and this time Liz quietly sat down and Sally, just being a child, slid close.

Liz put her arm around her. A hug! Looking at me, for the first time in months, Liz whispered: “Dad.” I gently touched her shoulder. Liz put her hands on the keys and out came, “Oh How He Loves You And Me.”

The door closed and it was time to take Liz “home” to her room. As we turned to leave, I heard the quiet: “Come back soon, Jesus and I love and need you.” With tears of thanksgiving, I realized anew why I found joy in my work as a chaplain among people with Alzheimer’s. That was the last time Liz gave any response and has now since gone to be with Jesus. But remember, keep looking for the window that just might give you some insight into how to reach deep within that confusion and darkness. And when, and if, the door pops open, jump through if only for a moment. These are very special people who need our love, compassion and understanding. As Liz said, “Oh how He loves you and me.”



— **Pastor Walt Beaman**
Hosanna Free Lutheran
St. James, Minn.

Note: Names are changed.

Beaman trained for a hospice/ Alzheimer’s specialty in chaplaincy at Trinity Hospital and Nursing Home in Minot, N.D.

On Feb. 23, Pastor Michael Brandt moderated an evangelism conference at Abiding Savior Free Lutheran Church, Sioux Falls, S.D. The all-day conference, titled, “Passing on the Baton,” saw more than 175 in attendance from area AFLC churches. Giving lectures and leading small groups were AFLC President Pastor Robert Lee, FLS Dean Dr. Fran Monseth, AFLBS Dean Pastor James Johnson, Evangelism Director Pastor James Rasmussen and members of the AFLC Evangelism Committee.

The leaders spoke of sustaining a biblical conviction of establishing and passing on a legacy of evangelism from one generation to the next. A concern among many evangelical leaders is the absence of a committed, younger generation to carry on this message. The seminars focused on establishing a heritage of evangelism in both the family and among generations.

Pastor Lee reviewed the history and practice of evangelism in both the Lutheran Free Church and the AFLC. Evangelism is the heartbeat of our heritage. At the heart of revival is the realization that we can’t do it — it has to be Jesus. Yet, this heritage of evangelism is one that is often rejected; history shows that the natural destiny of civilizations is to drift away.

According to Dr. Monseth, the two means of accomplishing the supreme mission of the church are the family and the Christian congregation. It all starts at home; yet the home is in deep trouble. We have many opportunities to impact families and bring them to Jesus.

Pastor Johnson focused on the four pillars of evangelism as the keys to revival. They include prayer, the Word of God, the Holy Spirit and obedience. Pastor Brandt encouraged us in closing the seminar with Philippians 3:14: “I press on toward the goal for the prize for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

We each need to make a personal commitment — a commitment of the local church and a commitment of our leaders — to maintain our evangelical heritage. The race we run is a marathon and not a sprint, and it is based on life-giving congregations who have members walking lovingly and faithfully with Jesus Christ.

This October, the AFLC will celebrate its 40th anniversary. What is the heritage of the AFLC and are we successfully passing on this heritage to the next generation?

— *Steve Jankord*
Abiding Savior Free Lutheran
Sioux Falls, S.D.

If other congregations or districts in the AFLC are interested in hosting a seminar, contact Pastor Rasmussen at the AFLC headquarters.

Passing on the baton

Evangelism conference

During the conference, and following it, I found myself thinking, “Everybody needs to hear this.” The turnout was quite strong (175+), but usually it’s the ones who are already supporting these efforts who attend. What about the many who need that extra “push,” who aren’t in disagreement, but who just don’t make the effort? I have no doubt that anyone who attended this evangelism conference came away with a stronger motivation to “pass on” the good news of Jesus. President Bob Lee, Dean Francis Monseth, and Dean Jim Johnson each took one leg of this conference, speaking of our heritage, our responsibilities within our own home and families, and the need to rebuild the walls within a society that is crumbling, spiritually.

I came away with a renewed and strengthened perspective of the treasure that we have in the gospel. I also realized that a race (a least a relay) is not run by three people, but four. The race isn’t yet over. The anchor leg still must be run, and our churches must take the baton and carry it if our families and our communities and our society are going to be ones of faith in the coming generations.

I believe you will be hearing more of this “Passing on the Baton” conference in the near future, in various locations. When you hear of it, mark you calendar, make it known to your family and your congregation, and consider seriously the risk of not finishing the race. You won’t be sorry you attended.

— *Pastor Tom Gilman*
Redeemer Free Lutheran
Canton, S.D.

AFLC 40th Annual Conference

Exalted Among the Nations — Psalm 46:10

Circle one

Name _____ Pastor/Visiting pastor/Lay delegate/Lay visitor

Spouse (if attending) _____ Pastor/Visiting pastor/Lay delegate/Lay visitor

Address _____

City/state/zip _____

Phone (day) () _____ (evening) () _____

El Campo Civic Center

2350 N. Mechanic
El Campo, TX 77437
(979) 541-5092

Host congregation:

Faith Lutheran
2103 N. Mechanic
El Campo, TX 77437
(979) 543-1842
Pastor Clyde Grier

Congregation _____

Registration fee(s):

Single @ \$30 (with one copy of Annual Report) \$ _____

Couple @ \$40 (with one copy of Annual Report) \$ _____

Total (meals and registration) \$ _____

Make checks payable to: AFLC and send to 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd., Plymouth, MN, 55441. Registrations received after June 1 must add a \$5 late fee.

To ensure meal availability, we ask that you register before June 1 with your meal selections marked on this form.

WMF

REGISTRATION

Please send separately to
Faith Lutheran in El Campo.

Name _____

Address _____

City/state/zip _____

Phone (____) _____

Congregation _____

Registration Cost: \$7

Wednesday luncheon
Cost: \$7

Wednesday banquet
Cost: \$9

TOTAL _____

MEAL	COST	#	TOTAL
Wednesday			
Lunch	\$7		\$
Thursday			
Vision 2004 breakfast	\$5		\$
Lunch	\$7		\$
Builder's Fellowship lunch	\$7		\$
Chaplains' lunch	\$7		\$
Schools Corporation dinner	\$9		\$
Friday			
Missions Corporation lunch	\$7		\$
Lunch	\$7		\$
ARC Corporation lunch	\$7		\$
Christian Education lunch	\$7		\$
Old Fashioned Texas BBQ dinner	\$9		\$
Pastor's banquet	\$9		\$
Saturday			
World Missions breakfast	\$5		\$
Lunch	\$7		\$
AFLC Foundation lunch	\$7		\$
Youth banquet	\$9		\$
Meals total			\$

AFLBS doors are open

"I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name" (Revelation 3:8).

Oh, what a marvelous door God has opened at our schools. Since the day He gave the vision of a Bible school to the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, God has held that door open. First, He called a few precious students, who by faith walked through the open door. As they continued to come, He enabled the first dorm and classroom facility to open its doors. Praise be to God, it became possible for more students to enter. The vision of a Christ- and Word-centered Bible school increased. More and more students eager to study God's Word came. Even though the rooms were full, the door remained open. Again, God intervened and a second dorm and classroom facility became a reality. Another set of doors were opened by the grace of God. Once again, God's Spirit moved upon the hearts of students to come. Praise God, three of my daughters passed through those open doors. And once again the rooms are full. And as before the DOOR IS OPEN.

It is not going to close. The doorman, Jesus Christ, is holding it open. As before, His Spirit is moving upon the hearts of His people. A people with little power. A people steadfastly committed to the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth of God's Word. A people openly unashamed of the name of Jesus. A people through whom God has worked His wondrous deeds in the past. A people who eagerly say, "Lord Jesus, continue to glorify your name and works through us."

We are those people and the time is now. Jesus is holding the door and we are a key in His hands. He has entrusted to us the conviction and the cash. There isn't anything more powerful than little people controlled by an Almighty God. Yes, as the gospel hymn proclaims, "Little is much, when God is in it."

A godly, prayed-over vision continues to burn in the hearts of the members of the AFLC Schools Board of Trustees. The master plan for our campus has been prepared. The first phase of seminary housing is complete. The schools are overflowing. The doors remain open. The



monies needed are great, but God is greater. Individuals and churches throughout our AFLC are currently being contacted. We need you to freely give of yourselves and your resources. This church-wide appeal needs an urgent response. To you and your fellow members we lovingly say, "Come in. The door is open."

— **Pastor Michael Brandt**
Abiding Savior Free Lutheran
Sioux Falls, S.D.

Cash gifts and three-year commitments can be made by mailing your response to Vision 2004 at 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd., Minneapolis, MN 55441 or calling the Vision 2004 office at (763) 545-5631. Please write or call today. Time is of the essence.



New members were received through adult information class at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Ponca City, Okla. Officiating is Pastor Mark Homp.



Bruce and Lucy Massey were accepted as new members at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Camarillo, Calif., by Pastor Rodger Olson.

The study tour to Turkey with AFLTS Dean Dr. Fran Monseth with Abiding Word Ministries has been postponed due to the events of Sept. 11, 2001. The new dates for the study on the Book of Revelation has been set for Oct. 22-31. The AFLTS spring schedule has been modified to reflect the change in the tour dates. Spring break will now coincide with AFLBS.

Vision of Glory Lutheran, Plymouth, Minn., was received by the AFLC Coordinating Committee on Feb. 25. Served by Pastor Mark Heringshaw, the church formerly belonged to the ELCA.

The Coordinating Committee

removed **Pastor Paul Larson**, Detroit Lakes, Minn., from the clergy roster at his own request.

Martin Bjornson, former World Missions Committee member, died Feb. 2 at the age of 91. He was a member of Grace Free Lutheran Church, Valley City, N.D.

Pastor Jon Wellumson is now serving both Beaver Creek Free Lutheran, Tioga, N.D., and Emmanuel Free Lutheran Williston, N.D.

Pastor Lawrence Dynneson, Nogales, Ariz., died March 4 in Tucson, Ariz. Dynneson, who was retired, had previously served Triumph Evangelical Lutheran, Nogales.



Solberg honored by Tioga WMF

Members of the WMF at Tioga, N.D., honored Jennie Solberg on her 95th birthday at a meeting on Feb. 20.

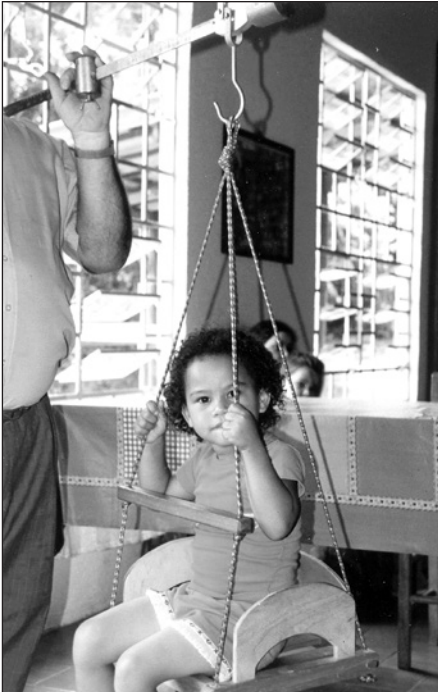
"Jennie has been an inspiration to all of us for years," writes Beatta Gilbertson, Tioga. "She still drives the 15 miles from where she lives in Ray, N.D., to Tioga for all church and WMF functions. She has attended most of the annual conferences for years. Maybe you were blessed to meet her at one of them. She still serves as hostess for her circle."

WMF general fund seeks donations

Thank you for faithfully sending your gifts of money, which enable the WMF in fulfilling its stated purpose, "Sharing in the great missionary outreach of the Christian church ..," fulfilling the Great Commission. Do you suppose that as the New Testament church sought to fulfill this same commission, they had general needs that had to be taken care of? Today, our WMF still has similar general

fund needs that must be taken care of. The general fund of our WMF plays an important role in fulfilling the Great Commission. Please consider how you can supply the funds needed for the WMF general fund. Contact WMF Treasurer Tammy Vukonich.

— **Faith Nelson**
WMF Director



TOP LEFT: A young girl is weighed during a health clinic at the ARCA in Curitiba, Brazil.

TOP: AFLC missionaries to Brazil (present and past) were joined by Home Missions Director Paul and Laurie Nash at the annual conference in Curitiba. Left to right are John and Ruby Abel, Connely and Carolyn Dyrud, the Nashes, Paul and Becky Abel and Tamba and Jonathan Abel.



BOTTOM LEFT: The system used to build a new roof at Campo Mourao.

NEAR LEFT: A construction worker builds new walls in Campo Mourao.

Nash speaks at annual conference in Brazil

Home Missions Director Paul and Laurie Nash returned from a two-week trip to the AFLC's mission work in Brazil with a new understanding of field work.

"For me it was like coming home," said Paul of arriving in Brazil. Thirty years ago, the Nashes hoped to work in Brazil, but the door was closed. Asked to be the guest speaker at the annual conference in Curitiba, the Nashes flew to Brazil on Jan. 17 and returned on Feb. 4. "It was like looking in the faces of people I already knew. Like a homecoming."

The theme for the annual conference (Jan. 25-27) was based on I Thessalonians 5:11, and Paul spoke on the tools Satan uses against the

church: discouragement and division. He spoke of God's church, which uses the opposite tools: encouragement and relationship building.

"What struck Laurie and I was the beautiful people. They were friendly, caring, loving and had a hunger for the Word, a hunger to reach their own community for Christ. You could tell that they were concerned for their own people and how to reach them," said Paul.

The Nashes toured the AFLC mission work in Brazil, visiting with Connely and Carolyn Dyrud in Campo Mourao, Paul and Becky Abel in Curitiba and Jonathan and Tamba Abel in Campo Grande, as well as many AFLC churches.

"I was touched by the compassion ministries," said Paul.

The AFLC missionaries sponsor ministries such as the Miriam Infant Home and work farm in Campo Mourao and a health clinic started by Paul and Becky at the ARCA in Curitiba.

In late February, a team of volunteer workers from the Twin Cities area went to Brazil to work on several projects, including a remodeling project at Campo Mourao that included a new roof and interior walls for the dining hall and kitchen facilities. The project needed to be complete by March 1, when the new school term began.

Learning about life on the mission field

A visit to Portugal



The Nelson family, missionaries in Portugal. Front: Rachel, Samuel, Benjamin and Josiah. Back: Sarah and Pastor David.

We only had a little over a week. I knew some of the language. The others didn't know any. What good could we accomplish? What would be the value of traveling all the way from Astoria, Ore., to Lisbon, Portugal?

The trip that five of us took from Bethany Free Lutheran in Astoria, Ore., had a lot of value. We may not have accomplished great work projects or spoken to thousands of people about the Lord, but hopefully we shared some encouragement and learned lessons that will have a lasting impact.

We traveled in the first part of February to Lisbon, the home of AFLC missionaries David and Sarah Nelson and their four children. The Nelsons have been serving the Lutheran Church of Portugal for little more than a year. They previously served in Brazil and then came to Portugal in the last part of the year 2000 as the first AFLC missionaries to that country. Pastor Artur Villares had previously served the church they pastor in Lisbon.

Pastor Villares lives in Porto, a city about a three- to four-hour drive north of Lisbon. He is a university professor there. The hope is that one day a new congregation will begin in that area, which Pastor Villares will serve.

In recent years, the people of Portugal have not shown great interest in the gospel of Jesus Christ. An average attendance of 200 is considered a large evangelical Protestant church, even in the heavily populated metropolitan area of Lisbon.

A great need exists for people to know Jesus, and so the work goes on. In the midst of the challenges the Nelsons have found encouragement from the Lord. The numbers have not been large but people have grown in Christ, relationships have been strengthened and new people have come and shown an interest in getting to know Jesus. And we trust encouragement was received from our visit.

Life on the mission field can get lonely. Every day is spent in a different culture, speaking a different language than that with

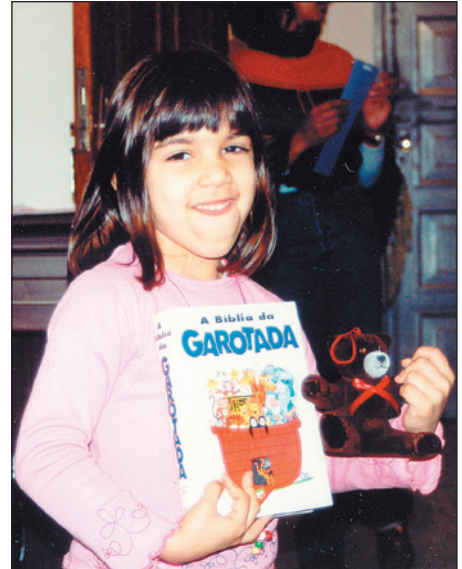
which you are most familiar. Some of our group noted how just a few days of being a stranger in unfamiliar surroundings was challenging. In that kind of situation, hearing news from home and being able to visit and share with people from your own culture and language can be an encouraging break.

The Nelsons have been blessed by their involvement with an International Christian Church and School in their area in a suburb of Lisbon. Their three oldest children attend school in this unique environment where students and faculty come from all over the world. The Nelsons also are occasionally able to be involved in activities of the congregation, which worships in English but has people coming from numerous countries. The people are in Lisbon as part of the diplomatic corps, with NATO, on business, with mission work or for some other reason.

The congregation the Nelsons serve has a monthly Saturday morning kids' club. We were able to take part in that and help the



Part of the group from Bethany Lutheran, Astoria, Ore., that traveled to Portugal. Left to right: Missionary Sarah Nelson, Melissa Grothe, Heather Olson, Jessica Boyovich and Rose Tollefson.



A young girl receives a Bible for regular attendance at kid's club.



The congregation in Lisbon, Portugal, with visitors from Astoria, Ore.

children do a couple crafts our group had prepared. The congregation has a worship service on Sunday afternoon. Our group sang for the congregation in Portuguese and English.

So what benefits come from a trip of this nature? For the missionaries, Pastor Villares and the congregation, hopefully encouragement was received along with a personal reminder that they are remembered, thought of and prayed for. Those who are part of a small group in a land where there is often little interest in the gospel appreciate reminders that they are part of a much larger family that cares for them and prays for them.

For those of us who went, the benefits and blessings received from God were great. One of the teenagers in the group, Melissa Grothe, observed, "Churches just don't happen. They take a long time and you just might be the

seed that starts the growth." She also said: "The best thing about Portugal was meeting David and Sarah and their family. They have a really neat family." Another teen, Jessica Boyovich, said what she learned about missionary life was, "Missionaries are always very busy and devoted to the stuff that they do. They have a lot to do. I think it's real cool that they are missionaries." Rose Tollefson, another one of the teens, in commenting about the Nelsons said: "They're really nice people and just normal like everyone else. ... They were really nice to us and the missionary life there seems like it'd be a lot of fun. Maybe I'll consider being a missionary myself."

An adult chaperone, Heather Olson, was impacted by the trip and her time with the Nelsons. "In Portugal I pretty much loved everything. They're such an amazing family. They made us feel so comfortable right from the first night. From Sarah I learned that being a missionary is fun. Yes, there are going to be challenges and there are moments, but when you are where God wants you to be and doing what He wants you to do it's fun. I learned so much from her. The Nelsons have just challenged me to pray for missions and to do whatever I can to help them in furthering God's kingdom."

Normal people who love Jesus, love people and are called by God to share the good news of Christ with a needy world — that's missionary life. We give thanks that is what we were able to observe for a few days and what we continue to be able to be a part of through prayer, support and doing whatever God calls us to do.

— *Pastor Craig Johnson*
Editor



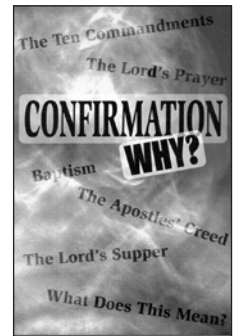
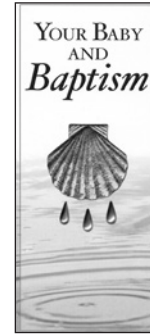
Parish Ed offers new resources

Two new resources are now available through the AFLC's Parish Education Department.

Your Baby and Baptism is a short pamphlet that endeavors to answer such questions as "Why baptize?" "When should you baptize?" and "What steps should you take?"

Confirmation Why?, also a small pamphlet, explains the necessity of confirmation and goes through the act and day of public confession.

To learn more, contact Ambassador Publications at (763) 545-5631 or write to 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd., Plymouth, MN 55441.



AFLC memorials February

Department given to ...
In memory of...

Vision 2004

Tonnes Pollestad Sr.
Evelyn Benson
Peter Westlake
Eckhart J. Heid
Russell Nelson
Edna Sollin
Martin Bjornson
Arthur Jensen
David Lutterman
Marlene Hanenberger
Harding Morken
Myrtle Johnson

Home Missions

Mary Krieger
Vernetta Jameson

AFLBS

Albin Holmquist
Myrtle Johnson
Lyle Holub
Tena Garrison
Agnes Nelson
Erwin Erickson
Carrie Nelson

AFLTS

Violette Benson
Inger Ohnstad

World Missions

Myrtle Johnson
Evelyn Benson
Eldon Jameson
Vernetta Jameson
Hector Graff
Myrtle Johnson

In honor of...

Vision 2004

Rudy Skogerboe

AFLTS/AFLBS

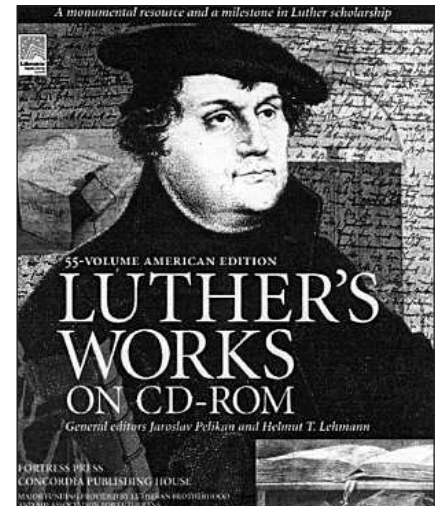
Pastor Robert Fedde

Electronic resource available

Parish Education is offering a 55-volume set of Luther's Works on CD-ROM. The translation project was published jointly by Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House in 1957. The CD-ROM is indispensable for studies of Luther and is invaluable for pastors, teachers, church historians and Bible students.

The first 30 volumes contain Luther's expositions of various biblical books. The remaining volumes include his Reformation writings and occasional pieces. The final volume is an index.

Until May 1, the set is available for \$150. Afterward, the price will increase to more than \$200. Contact Parish Education



for more information: (763) 545-5631, 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd., Plymouth, MN 55441, aflc.org or parished@aflc.org.

Association of Free Lutheran Congregations

3110 East Medicine Lake Boulevard
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55441

AFLC Benevolences (8 months) – January 1 - February 28, 2002

FUND	TOTAL Subsidy	REC'D IN FEBRUARY	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	% TOTAL
General Fund	\$268,060	\$16,359.20	\$42,628.91	16
Seminary	118,938	15,200.18	27,384.42	23
Bible School	217,227	16,424.17	36,195.58	17
Home Missions	278,872	15,384.38	37,086.41	13
World Missions	199,994	21,473.05	47,067.27	24
Youth Ministries	55,413	5,658.82	10,569.83	19
Parish Education	71,687	4,406.06	9,462.29	13
Church Extension	23,093	962.55	6,908.66	30
TOTALS	\$1,233,284	\$95,868.41	\$217,303.37	18
TOTALS 2001	\$1,119,759	\$88,864.33	\$215,733.49	19
Goal 17%				

The Evangelism Department received \$3,510 in February.

Facing death and celebrating life

It seems like not as many funerals are being held these days. That is not because less people are dying. People may be living longer, but the number of deaths in each generation is still 100 percent. Often, however, when someone dies there is no funeral or memorial service. It seems sad when that happens and there is no acknowledgement of the person's life, no seeking the Lord's help and comfort for those who mourn.

At other times, when a person dies an event called a celebration of life is held. The intent often is to focus not on the sorrow associated with the person's death, but to celebrate the significance of their life. I attended one where the person being remembered had a strong Christian testimony. The service spoke of the person's witness. Christ was lifted up and the hope He gives was proclaimed. We were told of the joy experienced by those who die in the Lord. Crying was not forbidden, but the atmosphere seemed to discourage the shedding of tears, even though the person had died rather young and suddenly, leaving behind a family. It was great to hear the good news of the difference Jesus makes. But, still, the absence of tears seemed strange. If Jesus wept when He was with friends who were mourning (John 11:35), it should be permissible and normal for us to sometimes weep as well.

Jesus encountered a funeral procession in a town called Nain. A widow's only son had died. "When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, 'Don't cry'" (Luke 7:13, NIV). In His command, "Don't cry," He wasn't saying, "Don't cry, what happened really isn't that bad." The Lord knew it was painful. That is why His heart went out to her. He saw her deep sorrow. In love He was inviting her to "Don't cry" because what was coming was going to be so good.

"Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, 'Young man, I say to you, get up!' The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother" (Luke 7:14-15).

When death occurs, the pain of what happens is real and should not be denied. The hope that Jesus gives, the life that is found in Him is real as well and should be celebrated.

The realities of death and life are both made clear

during this season of the year called Lent and Easter.

We cannot look long at the cross of Christ without being forced to take note of the pain and anguish of death. We desire for our death and our loved one's death to be dignified and painless. But Jesus was "despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Isaiah 53:3). He was "scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults" (Psalm 22:6-7).

A painful death suffered by the perfect Son of God was necessary to bring us life. Because of the pain He endured we can proclaim,

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (I Corinthians 15:55). For the one trusting in Jesus, "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). But to the ones left behind, death still hurts. We do not "grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope" (I Thessalonians 4:13). But we still grieve. We mourn that death came into this world because of sin. We know the parting is just for a time if we are united in Christ. But it still hurts. We long for the day when "there will be no more

**A painful death
suffered by the
perfect Son of
God was
necessary to bring
us life.**

death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

Not all celebration-of-life services are a denial of reality, but some feel that way. We would like to deny the pain of death. We would like to avoid facing up to all the trouble our sin has caused, but the cross won't let us. A terrible price had to be paid. But the good news is it has been paid.

Death still hurts. That is unavoidable. But while acknowledging the pain of death, we can celebrate the hope and life found in Christ. "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 15:57). Victory is all the sweeter when we realize the depth of the struggle.

Admitting the hurt and celebrating the hope — it seems impossible for us to do both of those things at the same time. But with Jesus it is possible. Because of the cross and the resurrection we can at the same time acknowledge the pain that comes because of life in this sinful world and rejoice in the hope and life that is ours because of Christ.

— *Pastor Craig Johnson*

BUILDING THE BASE

Teamwork and unity

March Madness is a term developed in recent years for the time of year when basketball tournaments are held. The term was coined in reference to the wild and sometimes unpredictable outcome of these tournaments at both the high school and college levels. Favorite teams, often loaded with talented and superior athletes, don't always come out victorious. Every year there are upsets. Teams that were given little or no chance for victory somehow find a way to win. Often it's because of extraordinary teamwork and an overwhelming attitude of togetherness.

Basketball is a team game. Give me a choice between a collection of five top athletes — skilled but self-centered — or a group of hard-working, unselfish players who put their team first, and I will take the latter every time. When players are only concerned with their own statistics, or gaining personal recognition, they will usually fail come tournament time.

Legends have been born about teams (such as the one featured in

the film "Hoosiers") of average ability with no standout players, who understand that winning depends on playing together as a unit, and being willing to sacrifice personal glory for team success. For these authentic "teams," success is not only measured in terms of counting victories, but can also be achieved by the effort itself. As players with varying skills and specific, yet different roles, each fulfill their

part; they help explain why teamwork and unity work to make basketball the number one spectator sport in America.

I would compare this brand of unity shown by team play in basketball to the unity of

Christian believers in a local congregation. The apostle Paul himself expresses such a thought in I Corinthians 1:10, "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought."

Give me the choice between a church full of outwardly talented, gifted people — each focusing on their own interests or success — or a

body of ordinary men and women (also gifted by God) whose desire is to build each other up, working together as a "team" to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ, and I would prefer the latter every time.

It is only natural for sinful human beings to focus on their own selfish concerns. "Me first" is at the core of every sinful heart. It is not natural for such people to work together and display deep, inward unity of mind and thought.

But that's where the work of Christ and His Holy Spirit play the key role. As sinners see their sinfulness before God and come to the cross of Jesus in honest and open confession and repentance, the Spirit of God works an inward change. Selfishness is replaced by selflessness. Individual glory gives way to teamwork and unity. Living for self is left behind, and living for Jesus becomes the motivating force in both individual and congregation. Only the real and living presence of Jesus Christ can accomplish unity.

The first church described above may at first be the most attractive (from the outside looking in), but it is the second congregation that will truly "attract" people — not just to their church, but to Jesus Christ Himself. "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

— *Pastor John Mundfrom
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