

AMBASSADOR

the wonder



the
wonder
of His birth

Our hope

BY MARCUS DAHL



Evangelism is answering questions people ask about the hope that is displayed by you. Imagine throughout your day—at work, the grocery store, the gas station, the library—being approached by those who want to know about the hope that you possess. This hope must be unusual and so uniquely displayed that people are drawn to it and want to know its source.

Is this hope optimism? Perhaps a carefree attitude? Or is it something different?

This hope makes me think of the definition of faith, given in the first verse of Hebrews 11. To paraphrase, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.

So what am I getting at? A positive attitude? No.

Consider I Peter 3:15: “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” In the first part of the verse, Peter tells us to set apart Christ as Lord. When we do so, we should be ready to give an answer, or a defense, to those who ask us about our hope.

If Christ Jesus is our Lord, people will respond to how we live. In other words, we are the aroma of Christ, ambassadors for Christ, living and vibrant Christians. I like the word vibrant; a living and vibrant Christian affects the environment he or she lives in.

Consider I Peter 3:13-14: “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.’”

Directly after these two verses, Peter urges his readers to set apart Christ as Lord and always be ready. Are you ready?

Remember, an evangelist is a Christian who, even though nervous about sharing the gospel, shares about Jesus anyway.

Even if you are a shy Scandinavian, it’s not an excuse to avoid being zealous. At times we need to be confronted and

confrontational. Even to the point of suffering? Yes. Suffering as a Christian in the United States at the end of 2010 is not suffering compared to the rest of the world.

Do you need encouragement for boldness? Even the apostle Paul asked for prayer to be bold in Ephesians 6:19-20. If you need a boost, go to www.persecution.com and request a free subscription to the Voice of the Martyrs magazine. When we read about Christians around the world who are tortured and killed because of their faith in Christ, it emboldens us.

In the very last portion of I Peter 3:15, Peter encourages us to share our faith with gentleness and respect. When you share your faith and bring up Christ in your conversations, do so lovingly and kindly.

Again, place Christ first everyday in your hearts. While living your faith out boldly, get ready to talk to people about Jesus as they watch you and see your hope. Then share Him gently and respectfully with them. Pray that many Christians will respond to the call. Amen.

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For the Christ-child who comes is the Master of all;
No palace too great, no cottage too small.

—Phillips Brooks

It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the most profound unfathomable depths of the Christian revelation lie. God became man; ... the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child ... The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as this truth of the incarnation.

—J.I. Packer

Christmas has lost its meaning for us because we have lost the spirit of expectancy. We cannot prepare for an observance. We must prepare for an experience.

—Handel Brown

When Christ entered our world, he didn't come to brighten our Decembers, but to transform our lives.

—Rich Miller



My Wonderful ✕ ✕ Counselor

By Clara Gunderson

“For a child will be born to us,
a son will be given to us,
... And his name will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Isaiah 9:6

I am alone in the decision to be made.
Others have recommendations and advice.
Others know what the answer should be.
They know what they would do.

It is not a life-threatening problem.
It is not a world-shaking problem.

But, a decision must be made ... by me.
There probably will not be any serious consequences
whichever way I decide. But then, how do I know?
Perhaps the one on the other end of the spectrum will
never even know the struggle I face.

But God does.
And I do.

I see perfectly good, understandable explanations for
deciding one way:

My own perceived needs.
My reasoning won't be still and brings to mind all
sorts of arguments.

One would think that at my age, and having walked
with the Lord for all these years, that there would be no
struggle—I could just go ahead and make the right deci-
sion. But I have learned that many issues in life take a lot
of soul searching with concentrated prayer, along with
serious time in God's Word, seeking counsel.

I open my Bible. I pray the prayer of the psalmist, a
prayer the Lord has never hesitated to answer, so eager is
He that I walk in perfect communion with Him:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

Psalm 139:23-24

Willing now to allow God's Word to be "a lamp to my
feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105), I'm ready to
read.

The bookmark shows me where I had left off. I begin
in Isaiah, chapter nine, remembering that this is God's
prophet speaking God's words of warning to His very own
people ... His very own unbelieving, disobedient, way-
ward, needy children. Others have told them to consult
with "witches and mediums," though God Himself had
promised to be with them. He'd told them this so de-
scriptively in the promise of a child to be born of a virgin,
whose name would be called *Immanuel* (God with us).

The use of names, I note, is extremely meaningful

to Isaiah. His own name means "Jehova will save (His
people);" one of his sons is named *Shear-jashub*, which
means "a remnant shall return," and a later-born son was
given the name *Maher-shalal-has-baz*, meaning "your
enemies will soon be destroyed."

In the ninth chapter I read of yet another sign to be
given, and as before, it is so descriptive in tenderness,
ownership and intention:

For a child will be born to us,
A son will be given to us; ...
And His name will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

I stop here to think about these names, and in doing
so I quickly realize that the Lord is offering Himself to
me in each of the roles indicated by His names. What
had I prayed for a moment ago? Didn't I just ask Him to
search my heart for wrong motives, hurtful ways, anxious
attitudes? Had I not just agreed with Him that it is His
Word that guides my steps in the way that He chooses for
me? How He offers Himself to me as a counselor—not just
any counselor, but my Wonderful Counselor. My Bible
footnote says "wonderful" regularly means "supernatural."
How does this work? His Spirit, through His Word, whis-
pers to my spirit, "This is the way, walk in it."

Ah! A counselor, a wonderful counselor who knows
all and who sees all the consequences or blessings of what
any decision will bring. A counselor in whom, as one
commentary on this portion describes, "there is no need
to surround Himself with counselors; but who without re-
ceiving counsel at all, He counsels those who are without
counsel ..." (Keil and Delitzsch).

My thoughts fly to Job. In the misery of his loss of
children, wealth and health, he bore the ill counsel of
his wife and friends, yet waited upon the Lord to reveal
Himself. How gloriously, personally, God came to Job
not only in His role as counselor, but also as Mighty God,
Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace.

I seek no less in this decision. I seek no less in my life.
I look to no one but my Wonderful Counselor, my Mighty
God, my Eternal Father, my Prince of Peace. I discuss my
decision with one who shares my life, and am confirmed
by the joy we share together.

Now may His name be glorified! The name that is
above all names!

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Minn.*

Our oldest boy, Isak, burst through the door when he got home from school one day and hollered, “Ninety-three days until Christmas!” It was the middle of September. The fall season hadn’t even officially arrived. Just three days earlier, I was driving home with the children in a heavy snowfall. Boy did that create some excitement in our van. Our 4-year-old asked me if it was Christmas.

“No, Christmas won’t be here for about four months,” I told Josiah. A little later he asked, “Will Christmas be here in four minutes?”

For our children, it can seem like it takes an eternity for Christmas to arrive. The anticipation and excitement is evident for weeks or months. I know of some who start preparing for Christmas in January. Also, there are some (myself included) who listen to Christmas music during the summer months. It’s without a doubt a favorite time of the year for many. What is it about this season that people look forward to?

Most families have traditions. I have many memories of my younger years of baking with Mom, decorating the house, putting up the tree and decorating it with lights and ornaments, having big turkey or ham meals, going to church services, and getting together with aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Times and circumstances change, though. Since being married and raising children, my husband and I have begun our own family traditions. One of the favorites, especially for our children, is to camp out in the living room by the tree on Christmas Eve. Everyone gets snuggled in their sleeping bags, and once the children settle down, Tom reads from Luke 2. Then we sing carols under the white lights of our tree.

Besides looking forward to celebrating Christmas traditions, there are also the cards to send, the gifts to buy, the school and church programs to attend, the parties to go to, the baking to do, and the entertaining in our homes. Christmas can be a time full of activity. When we were first married, Tom and I had commitments for 17 straight days in December. And we didn’t even have children yet.

Then again, it can also be a very quiet, lonely or difficult time for some. Maybe there has been the loss of a loved one, or family members move far away and it is not possible to get together or come home for Christmas.

Whatever it may be, how can we keep from just going through the motions and being concerned about following traditions during the Christmas season?

I believe the answer is Jesus. Even when times, people, and circumstances change, the meaning of Christmas will never change. If we have Jesus in our hearts and lives, everything we do will reflect Him. Whether your days are extra busy, or you are lonely during this season, keep Jesus as your focus. He came down from heaven to earth to live as a human being, for the sole purpose of dying for our sins. It can be summed up in John 3:16-17: “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”

When I was younger, we would always get a real tree. After Christmas, my dad would cut all the branches off and use the trunk of the tree to make a cross. He would then use that cross in church for the season of Easter. I’m so thankful for the cross, for Jesus, and for my parents who taught me that He is the reason to celebrate Christmas.

This is the first coming of Christ. He has promised in His Word that there will be a second coming. I Thessalonians 4:16-17 says, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.”

Jesus will come to take born again believers to heaven for all eternity. Christmas may sometimes seem an “eternity” away, especially in the minds of children. But our anticipation and excitement for Jesus to come again should be just as evident as it is when waiting for Christmas to come.

I can guarantee you’ll be asked, at least once during this season, “Are you ready for Christmas?” With eternity in mind, how are you going to answer that question? My hope is that you can answer with a resounding “Yes!”

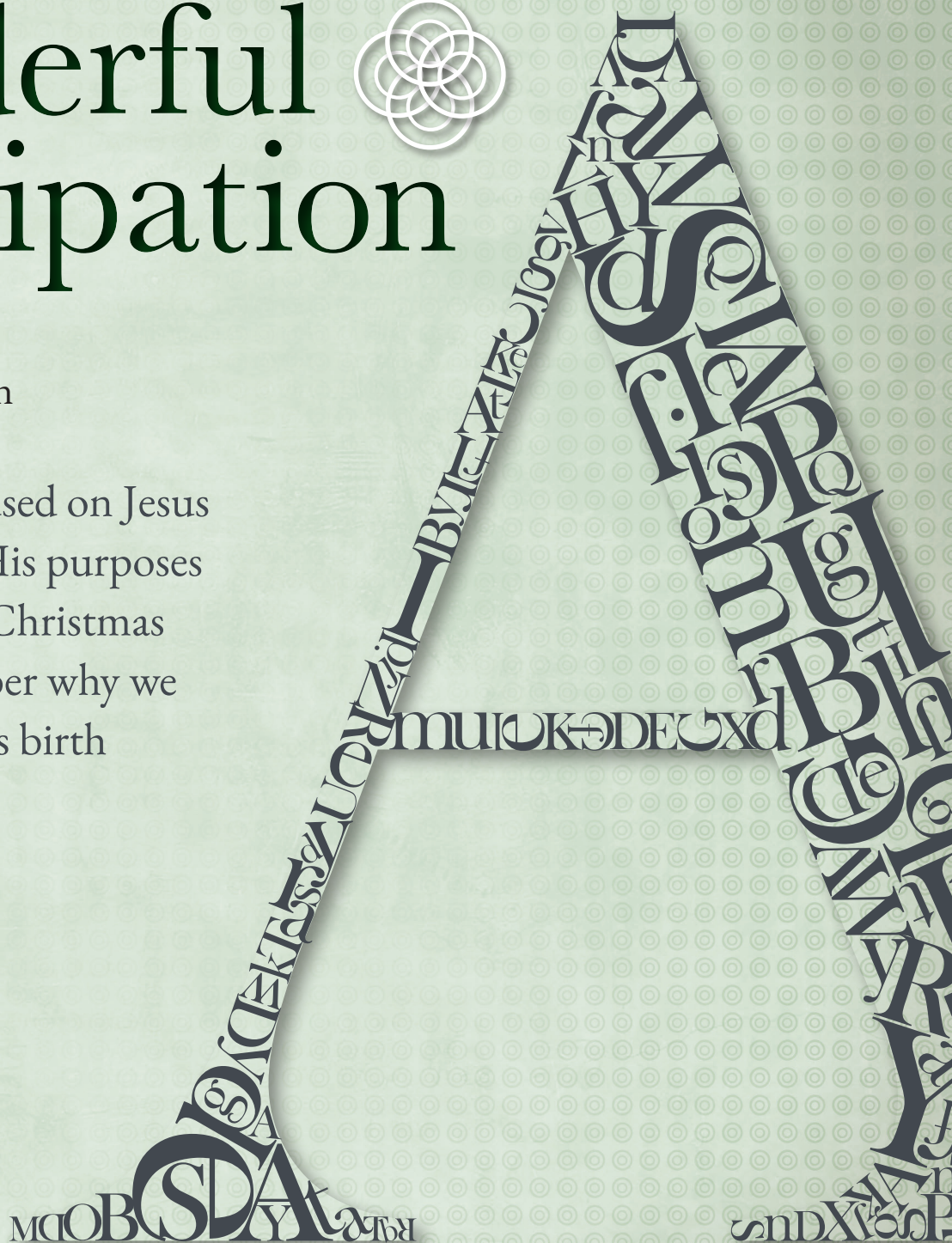
Olson is married to Pastor Tom Olson, who serves the Trinity Lutheran Parish, Golden Valley, N.D.

Wonderful Anticipation



By Beth Olson


A heart focused on Jesus
will reflect His purposes
as we await Christmas
and remember why we
celebrate His birth





Longing with awe & wonder

By Ryan Egan



Christmas is the one season I still long for almost as much as I did when I was a child. I long for Christmas music, family gatherings, and snowy, curl-up-by-the-fire days; advent calendars with doors to open that provide tasty chocolate treats; the fun of knowing I will be able to bless friends and family members with a special gift just for them.

These are all good things and worth waiting for. Now, though, I am praying that I will start to possess the awe and wonder of the original anticipation of the coming of Christ.

Advent, or *adventus* in Latin, means “coming.” The season of advent was originally a time to prepare for Christ’s second coming to this world. It still is, to some degree, but not with nearly as much fervent expectation. After Jesus’ ascension in Acts 1, the disciples were told that “he will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” In the book of Revelation, three different times Jesus said “behold, I am coming soon” (21:20, 22:7, 22:12). We believe these passages to be true, but do not grasp what “soon” means, and so the eager anticipation has worn off.

Instead of waiting in expectation for the time when “every eye will see him” (Revelation 1:7) we might become complacent in sharing the gospel during our brief time on earth. If only we could better understand God’s timing and desire “that all should reach repentance” (II Peter 3:9). If only we would seek to bring His gospel to all before it’s too late instead of thinking we still have time. Knowing that “the Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some of [us] count slowness” (II Peter 3:9), we should wait with purpose and faith, not with idle minds and hearts.

The first coming of the Savior is often celebrated on Christmas day by singing “Joy to the World.” This hymn was originally written by Isaac Watts as an exposition of Psalm 98, in which verses 7-9 include a prophetic word about Christ’s return to this world. “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.”

Watts writes: “No more let sin and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.” These words can only be truly applied after the triumphant return of Christ. Until He comes back to make all things new, the curse of sin and

sorrow will continue to be present in this world. But oh, the joy He will bring when He comes to fulfill the promise of making His blessings flow “far as the curse is found!”

The second half of Watts’ hymn has virtually been lost, but goes on to proclaim other truths we will experience when the second coming has been fulfilled:

“To our Almighty Maker, God,
New honors be addressed;
His great salvation shines abroad,
And makes the nations blest.

Let the whole earth his love proclaim
With all her diff’rent tongues,
And spread the honors of his name
In melody and songs.”

(Verses four and six, from Watts’ 1719 *The Psalms of David: Imitated in the language of the New Testament, and applied to the Christian state and worship*.)

As you celebrate the Christmas holiday, begin to let your heart grow full of anticipation of Jesus’ second coming. As you count down with advent calendars, know that each day lived on this earth is one more day closer to the day in which He will return.

As you gather with family, look forward to the day when everyone who is a part of the body of Christ—all nations, tribes, and tongues—will be gathered in one glorious, eternal family reunion. Even in times of sorrow, take joy in looking forward to the time when we will be reunited with loved ones we have lost.

As you enjoy singing wonderful Christmas songs and hymns, anticipate the astounding worship that will take place when Christ returns: worship that will cause believers and unbelievers alike to bow their knees and “confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:11).

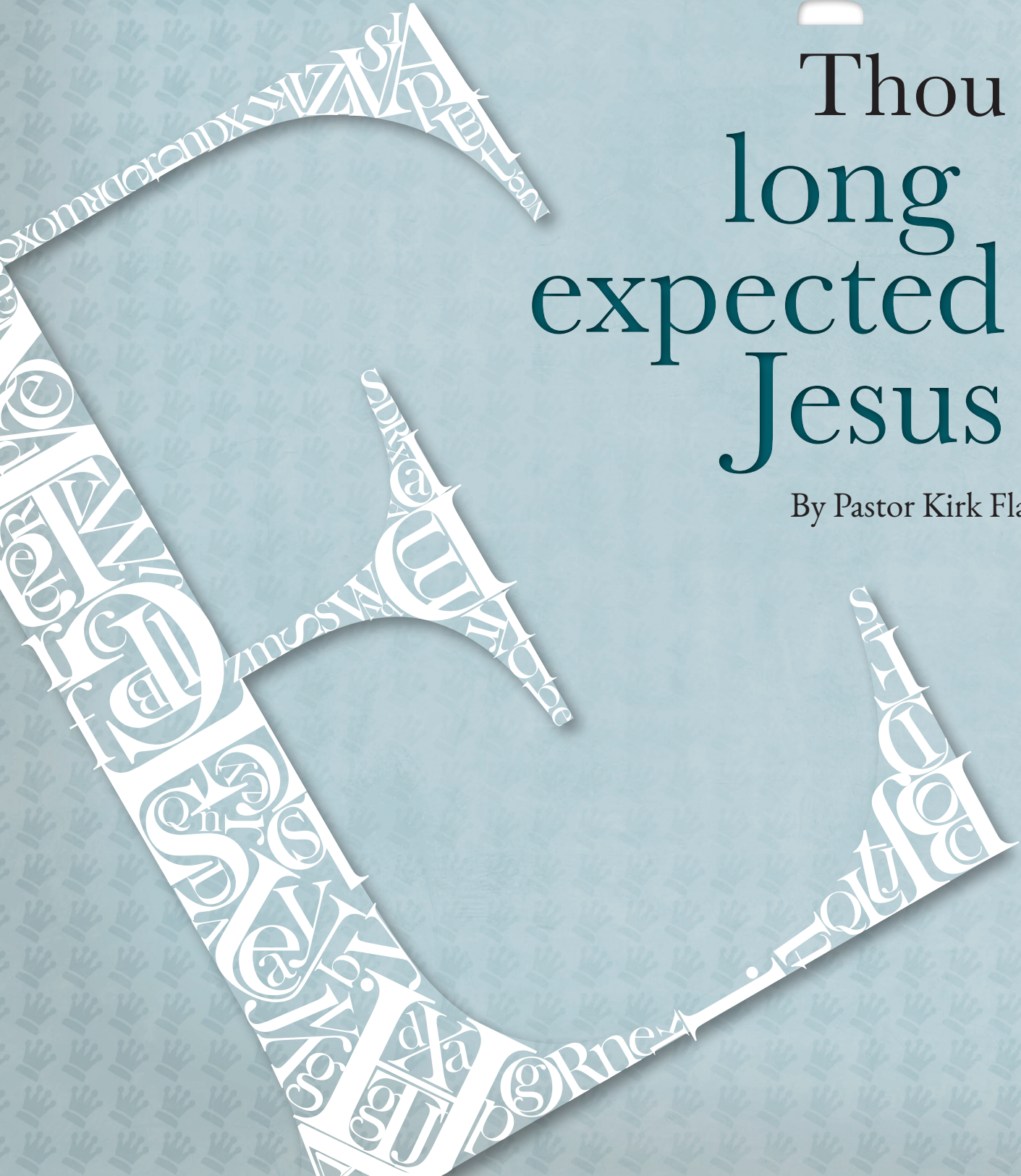
This Advent, expect the greatest gift of all. Look to the day when we will see our Savior face to face. There will be no more tears or sorrow, the Lamb will be our light, and we will be able to thank Him for all He has done for us.

Egan is a member of Living Word Free Lutheran, Sioux Falls, S.D. His blog, I am an Offering, covers a range of topics from ministry to theology where he hopes to inspire everyone who reads to live lives of worship “in all places, by all people, at all times.” Read more at iamanoffering.com/ambassador.



Thou long expected Jesus

By Pastor Kirk Flaa



A few years ago our family journeyed to California for vacation. One night was spent walking along Hollywood Boulevard. The street dancers and various trinket vendors gathered quite a crowd, but nothing compared to the throng gathered on the street directly opposite of the Kodak Theatre. In fact, police had barricaded the street and pedestrians had to walk on the sidewalk opposite of the theatre.

I asked one of the vendors what all the fuss was about, and she informed us that it was movie premiere night, and none other than Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie were in attendance. Children on shoulders, cameras in hand and necks craning, the whole street was buzzing with excitement and anticipation as they watched the Kodak's front entry and the rows of limousines at curbside.

The wait was to be long and disappointing, though, for the vendor also let me in on a fact the crowd obviously did not know—the couple had already slipped quickly out the back entrance of the theatre and had been whisked off site! Although Brad and Angelina were expected, those waiting were looking in the wrong place, thus they missed their appearance.

I recount that scene for it speaks to a similar one in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago. The expectation of the Messiah was nothing new to the Jews, and had Messiah Jesus come into this world in the manner that was expected by His people, it would likely have been similar to movie premiere night in Hollywood—lights, cameras, crowds, limousines, and the electricity of anticipation that no one would want to miss. A mighty Messiah, one who would return power to the Jewish nation, was what Jesus' own desired. Of course He would come into the world in a manner corresponding to His greatness. Tragically, those waiting missed it.

In perhaps the greatest irony of all history, God ordained that the One who would save the world would be welcomed into it with virtually no fanfare and anticipation. The angelic chorus notwithstanding, the events of Jesus' birth are best described as simple, humble, and nondescript.

Obviously, this is foreign to our way of thinking. When we introduce a dignitary or bring in a new product line, we pump it up, advertise it, glamorize it, and otherwise draw attention to the individual or product. After all, we don't want anyone to miss it.

Yet in the Gospel narratives of the birth of Jesus, we come face to face with a baby in a manger and a small

town off the beaten path. We meet unassuming parents and farm animals who are eyewitnesses to the event. Assuredly our ways are not His ways, but does it not beg the question: Wouldn't it have been more effective for Jesus to come in such a way that the world was riveted on the event? After all, we do not want anyone to miss it.

Yet, for Jesus to have come into this world in the way expected and anticipated, we would have been left without one of Christmas' greatest object lessons—that of the *unexpected*. Let us think upon that word “unexpected” for a moment. It is the essential summary of Jesus and His ministry, is it not? Unexpected. A life and ministry characterized by choosing to serve rather than being served; of humility over greatness; of grace over power; of meekness over strength; of silence over boasting; of sacrifice over gain; of giving over taking. It would have been far easier to just preach about these characteristics. Yet Jesus did much more than just preach, He lived it! He is a Messiah who serves, sacrifices, and gives. Definitely not what you would expect, so be careful not to miss it, for to do so is to miss Jesus.

It is helpful in this context to draw attention to a verse in the Gospel of Luke that we often glance over. In Luke 2:8 we read of the shepherds “keeping watch over their flock by night.” I have often reflected upon the fact that during the night most people would be asleep; expecting nothing special, they would naturally go to bed, and as a consequence, would miss this event.

I fear our problem today is much the same. Too often we find ourselves falling asleep during the Christmas season—when activities exhaust us, when gifts consume us, and when we begin looking for contentment, joy, and peace any place apart from Jesus. These things are not to be found in the bright lights, the extravagant gifts, or the hustle of the season. These, you see, would be the *expected* places—the places where the world searches. No, Jesus is to be found in the unexpected—in the quiet reflection of our hearts, in the contentment and solitude of a dimly lit manger, and in the joy of giving.

My urging for you this Christmas season is to keep watch and use caution so that you are not lulled asleep in the expected places, and thereby miss Him in the unexpected. Indeed, the long expected One comes in an unexpected way, “born a child and yet a king.” Be careful, we do not want to miss Him!

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THE SECOND COMING

By Pastor Jerry Moan

“We were warned!”

That’s the message emblazoned on the cover of the recent doomsday flick, *2012*. Sadly, this is not merely Hollywood-style science fiction hype.

Millions of people actually believe the world will end in 2012. A unique alignment of the sun within the Milky Way is set to take place on the winter solstice in 2012. Supposedly, it’s the first time in about 26,000 years. Blend a dash of science with the purported end of the Mayan calendar in 2012, throw in a vague prophecy or two from Nostradamus, and you’ve got a recipe for hysteria ... and one more episode in the annals of the History Channel.

Apart from the committed doomsday believers are the uncertain millions who worry plenty but try to ignore the threat. Many despair, “Is there any hope for mankind *beyond* 2011?” “Is there some way to avoid certain catastrophe?” Some within the Church are enticed by the possibility that 2012 will usher in the end of the age.

What does the Bible say about all of this? When *will* Jesus come again? Is this world soon coming to an end? As we celebrate our Savior’s first advent and anticipate the start of the New Year, these are questions which deserve serious thought.

2012 AND THE MAYAN CALENDAR

A Google search for “2012 Mayan Calendar” dredges up more than 2 million results, telling us something of the level of curiosity in the topic. To spare you from weeks of wasted Web browsing, below is my *Reader’s Digest* version of the Mayan doomsday scenario.

Borrowing a metaphor from the modern industrial world, one site explains that “on Winter Solstice A.D. 2012 it is as if the Giant Odometer of Humanity on Earth hits 100,000 miles and all the cycles big and small turn over to begin anew. The present world age will end and a new world age will begin.” Dec. 21, 2012, is supposedly the day when the Mayan’s “Long Count” calendar runs out or turns over, marking the end of a 5,126-year era.

USA Today notes several authors who disagree about what humankind can expect. One writer envisions the restoration of a “true balance between Divine Feminine and Masculine.” Another anticipates a “change in the nature of consciousness,” assisted by ancient indigenous wisdom and psychedelic drug use. A religion editor noted that “part of the appeal of these earth religions is that notion that we need to reconnect with the earth in order to save ourselves.”

Opinions vary, but all seem to echo the theme of Hollywood’s 2012 movie trailer: “Mankind’s earliest civilization warned us this day would come.” Are we to take such warnings seriously?

END-TIME PREDICTIONS IN HISTORY

The 2012 Mayan Calendar termination point is hardly the first doomsday prediction in history. Christopher Columbus prophesied that the world would end in the year of our Lord 1656. Many more recent predictions could be recounted:

Remember Y2K? The script was essentially the same.

In the 1800s, William Miller (1782–1849), the founder of the Adventist movement, predicted that Christ would return in 1843. Disappointed, he revised his prediction to October 1844. Wrong again!

Along came Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses cult, who predicted that the world would end in the battle of Armageddon in 1914. His followers proposed subsequent dates with the same degree of success—zero!

Psychic Jeane Dixon predicted that a comet would devastate the earth in the 1980s. Apparently it missed.

Recent “Christian” end-time prophets include author Hal Lindsey who forecast the rapture to occur in 1981; Pentecostal missionary Lester Sumrall (1913–96) predicted

that Christ would return by the year 2000; U.S. presidential hopeful Pat Robertson set 1982; Edgar Whisenant mass-mailed his pamphlet, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*; Benny Hinn claimed Jesus would appear in 1993; Harold Camping boldly predicted the world would end on Sept. 6, 1994.

The list is far from exhaustive.

BIBLICAL TRUTH ON CHRIST’S RETURN

The Bible is explicitly clear that we should not trust date-setters. Predictions pinpointing the return of Christ and/or the end of the world are nothing short of false prophecies. While Christ’s coming is certain, the exact timing of his coming cannot be predicted. Our Lord himself declares, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matthew 24:36, ESV). Our Lord warned His disciples that it was not for them “to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). Christ will return at God’s appointed time (Acts 3:21). Scoffers may challenge the reality of Christ’s coming but the delay only highlights God’s patience and His desire that many will come to repentance (II Peter 3:4, 8–9).

When our Lord comes again, the Bible tells us that His return will be visible to all, “as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west” (Matthew 24:27). The last trumpet will announce His glorious arrival in the company of His holy angels (see Matthew 16:27; 24:30–31; 25:31; I Corinthians 15:52; I Thessalonians 3:13; 4:16; II Thessalonians 1:7). Other passages describe His coming as sudden and unexpected, “like a thief in the night” (Matthew 24:43–44; I Thessalonians 5:1–2; II Peter 3:10; Revelation 16:15; cf. Matthew 24:37–39).

That’s why God’s Word calls us to be alert and prepared spiritually (II Peter 3:8–14). We are to be watchful, living in readiness (Matthew 24:42–44). We are to occupy ourselves with doing what our Lord has called us to do, walking in purity and obedience to the Word as we anticipate beholding our Savior face to face (I Thessalonians 5:23; I Timothy 6:14; I Peter 1:13; II Peter 3:11–14; I John 2:28–29).

So don’t be taken in by the false predictions of false prophets. Instead, rejoice in what we know based on the Word of God: “...we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (I John 3:2–3).

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Christmas in Brazil is a very merry holiday. As Americans, Brazilians like to be surrounded by family and friends during this joyful season; we like to gather around big tables of food to enjoy ourselves and the meal. Since we are below the equator, Christmas falls in the summer. Our meals always include lots of cold fruit and ice cream. The kids are on vacation from school and the adults usually have some days off, as well.

For most Brazilians, Christmas is a time to party and have fun. Families like to travel and go to the beach for the occasion. Many celebrate eating the famous *churrasco* Brazilian barbecue in their beach houses. Fireworks are also a festive way that we celebrate Christmas. Brazilians do their big celebration on Christmas Eve. It is common for families to exchange gifts on Christmas Eve and then wait until midnight to eat.

Even though the majority of Brazilians see Christmas as an industrial holiday and a time to enjoy themselves, I was taught the real meaning of Christmas from a young age. My immediate family is Christian and understands what Christmas is really about. However, the majority of my family members are non-practicing Catholics. At Christmas, their focus is not on Jesus. Even though our Christmas holidays are warm and festive, they have not been Christ-centered. My mom, grandma and the girls spend the whole day preparing the meal while the men relax and do the last-minute stuff. Then we exchange gifts and eat. The rest of the night is spent talking and laughing. I cherish many good memories from these times.

One Christmas that stands out to me was quite a while ago, when I was 9 years old. This was one of the few completely Christ-centered Christmases that I remember. Our church put together a drama piece for the Christmas Eve service. The kids and our youth group were the ones responsible for organizing and presenting it. We worked hard to communicate a very special message to those who came to the service.

The message that we brought was that “our hope rests in the manger.” The drama was about an orphan girl who put all her trust in her heavenly Father. She didn’t have any

possessions, but at Christmas she was happy, because she knew better than the people who supposedly had everything. She knew that her joy rested in that manger, in the fact that Jesus came into this world to save her. With a mix of drama and songs we shared the good news of Christ’s birth.

After the service I remember a smaller group of people gathered to pray; we were in a big circle holding hands. I remember Pastor Connelly Dyrud, who was my pastor for many years, asking each one of us what Christ meant to us. It was so beautiful to witness people declaring their love for Christ that night. From the oldest to the smallest we were all praising God for the gift He sent to this world. Even though we don’t really know what day Christ was born, we still choose to rejoice in the fact that He was born as our Savior in a manger.

The wonderful night ended with a feast at my family’s home. People from our church and family came over to celebrate the real meaning of Christmas. There was no exchange of gifts that night, but it didn’t really matter because the joy of Christ was in our hearts. That night helped me to understand the real meaning of Christmas and being a part of God’s family. It was so wonderful to be able to celebrate Christmas with Christ as the center.

Even though there are many unique ways to celebrate Christmas, the true meaning of Christmas remains the same. Whether you live in Brazil, America or around the world, our hope still rests in the manger!

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and laying in a manger.’”
Luke 2:10-12.

Even though I enjoy the Christmas festivities that we have in Brazil, I have realized that salvation came to us the night Christ was born. And that is a real reason to celebrate!

Cardoso, a senior at the Association Free Lutheran Bible School, is from Sao Francisco Do Sul, Brasil.




Hope in a manger

By Debora Cardoso







A test of faith

Translated by Pastor Raynard Huglen

This is about a pastor's family in pioneer America. Things had gone backward for them in temporal matters. Christmas was close at hand and the winter was cold and harsh. It was in the difficult year of 1893. The father had to travel around to hold meetings in the biting cold in a coat which was scarcely warm enough in October. Their breakfast consisted of a cup of tea without sugar and a piece of bread without butter.

The wife recounts how it was:

I patched our clothing in a despairing frame of mind which had sunk to almost nothing. Our two boys were healthy, but our little Ruth was sickly and weak. The families around us were friendly and nice, but in hard times they all had enough to do for themselves that each family had to fight its own battles. Gradually my faith began to weaken, just as I most needed it. In my youth I had learned to take God at His word, and I had mastered that lesson fairly well. I had lived on the promises in dark times until, with David, I had come to know Who was my Rock and my Deliverer. Now a daily prayer for forgiveness was all I could get out. It looked as if God had given us up. But I didn't say what I thought.

Christmas came closer and closer. Our boys waited for skates as a Christmas present. My little Ruth wished for a beautiful doll, and she had been told to pray to God about that.

Eventually Christmas Eve morning came and my husband was called out to visit a sick person. I wrapped a scarf around his throat and tried to whisper an encouraging word, which I was used to doing, but the words died on my lips and I let him leave without it. It was a dark and hopeless day. I let the children go to bed early, and as I sat by Ruth's bed I heard her for the last time pray confidently and decidedly about the doll. She added, "I believe it will be here in the morning, Mother."

In my heart I felt like I would rather die in order to save her from disappointment. I sat down in my loneliness and let the tears fall freely. At last my dear John came home, tired and benumbed with cold. When I looked up in his face and saw the dark and despairing expression there, the thought came to me: John has given up, too!

I set tea before him, but I felt sick and confused. He gripped my hand and we sat awhile, not exchanging a word. It felt like I wanted to say to God that His promises weren't true.

John stood up suddenly when the doorbell rang and there was a brisk knock. An older man from the congregation stood in the doorway.

"A box has come for you," he said, "and I hurried to bring it over since I believe it is something for Christmas. Here is a turkey, a sack of potatoes and some flour from my wife."

After he had brought the box in, he disappeared with a hearty, "Merry Christmas!"

Without uttering a word, John took a hammer and opened the box. We saw that it contained much clothing of various kinds. I felt as if my Savior cast a reproachful look at me. John sat down and hid his face in his hands.

"I can't handle this," he blurted out. "I have failed in my faith. God tested me in order to see if I could hold out. Now I can tell out of experience how terrible it is to fall away from God."

"John," I said, "don't talk that way. Let's both pray to God to forgive us."

"Wait a minute, my dear," he answered, and went into another room.

I fell upon my knees. The darkness went out of my soul. It was as if Jesus spoke to me with the loving word, "daughter." The blessed word of love and joy streamed in over my soul. I was so overfilled with love and thanksgiving

that I forgot everything. When John returned I saw that he had also found peace.

"Now, my dear wife, we will thank God together."

He poured out his heart in praise and thanksgiving with words from the Bible because none other could express our gratitude as well as these.

It was 11 o'clock. The fire was almost out and the box still stood where we left it. We put more wood on the fire, tended the light and began to examine our treasure. There was an overcoat, a full suit. Oh, we both cried and laughed like children. There were boots for us both. A paper was inside mine—I have it yet and I think it will be left as an inheritance for my children. It contains Jacob's blessing on Asher: "Thy bars (or shoes) shall be iron and brass; and as thy days so shall thy strength be" (Deuteronomy 33:25).

In a pair of winter gloves for John the same dear hand had written: "For I, Jehovah thy God, will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee. 'Fear not; I will help thee'" (Isaiah 41:13).

It was a wonderful box. There was clothing for the boys and a red dress for Ruth. There was an envelope with \$10 in it. In the center of the bottom of the box there was another box. We both broke out in tears when we saw that it contained a beautiful doll. Then we broke out again in a joyful cry, for at the side lay two pairs of skates. We wept in gladness.

It was now past midnight. I brewed tea and placed a piece of cake beside it, and John boiled some eggs. Then we talked with heartfelt joy about our lives and the amazing help with which God had visited us.

You should have seen our children Christmas morning. The boys shouted loudly when they saw the skates, and Ruth whispered, "I knew that it would come, Mother, but I will thank God anyway."

It was a congregation in the East which had sent the box, and we sent our heartfelt thanks. Our memory of that Christmas Eve stands as a precious memorial stone (I Samuel 7:12).

We have experienced hard times since then, but we have set our hope in God and have not worried so much as to despair of His protecting care.

Author unknown. From Kristelig Folk-Kalender. Translated from Norwegian by Huglen, who lives in Newfolden, Minn.



A warm reminder of God's love

BY INGRID GILES

Every year guests at our church look forward to getting a Christmas quilt.

Women in the States make them. They meet throughout the year at someone's home or at their church, and they make beautiful, warm quilts. As they sew and fellowship with each other, they also pray for the people who will use these quilts in Mexico, and for the ministry of Pastor Todd and Barb Schierkolk, AFLC missionaries. Then they send them in boxes to a place where the Schierkolks can pick them up and bring them down to Jerez, Mexico.

Meanwhile, throughout the year in Jerez, children are gathering to learn about Jesus. They meet in a couple of different neighborhoods to sing songs, recite long passages of Scripture in chorus, and learn about Jesus with the Ambassador Sunday School material. They also pray together and learn firsthand about God's love for them and His power to answer prayer. Most of these children don't come from Christian families; many of their parents probably wouldn't dare enter a Protestant church unless it was to see their children perform—or perhaps to get a quilt.

At Christmas time it all comes together. The Sunday school kids put on a play and the kids from the kids clubs come in to church on that evening to join with the Sunday school kids in singing and reciting the Christmas program.

Everyone is invited, especially the parents. And they come! Quite often they come in large family groups; we usually have several people standing in the doorways because the sanctuary is full. They hear the gospel preached. They see what we are about, and they let go of some misconceptions. One year a couple of guests were surprised to hear that we prayed the Lord's Prayer. Some of them visit with members of our church, and quite often they have questions. They are always invited to come back.

In the end, they bring home a quilt (one per family). By meeting a physical need, the quilt serves as a tangible reminder of the warmth of God's love and the message they heard ... and to us as missionaries, it also serves as a warm reminder of those who support our ministry from the States, covering us with their prayers.

Giles is a short-term missionary assistant working in Jerez, Mexico.

AFLC pursues hiring a Development director

Position would support and promote ministries of the AFLC

Members of the AFLC Coordinating Committee are seeking a candidate for the position of Development director of the AFLC. The corporations of the AFLC are cooperatively creating this new position to promote and support the ministries and work of the entire AFLC.

Please send your resume by Dec. 31 to President Elden Nelson, 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd, Plymouth, MN, 55441.

For more information, contact Brad Severson by phone at 605-310-5915, or e-mail at brddel@sio.midco.net or Vint Bruflat by phone at 480-540-0658, or e-mail vbruflat@cox.net.

Friestad hired as new Student Development director for AFLBS

Chad Friestad, Camarillo, Calif., has accepted a call from the AFLC Schools Board of Trustees to serve as Student Development director for AFLBS.



Friestad is a 2003 graduate of AFLBS and a 2007 graduate of Moody Bible Institute, Chicago, with a degree in youth ministry. He began his full-time ministry on campus starting Dec. 1.

Friestad replaces Sam Nash, who held the position since June 2009 and tendered his resignation in September.

Friestad most recently worked with the youth at Good Shepherd Free Lutheran, Camarillo, Calif., under the AFLC Home Missions Department as a Parish Worker.

In his position as director of Student Development, Friestad will work with current students, prospective students and alumni.

"My goal is simple," said Friestad, "[I want] to continue making disciples of Jesus Christ and training spiritual leaders, all while fulfilling the mission and purposes of AFLBS."



Michael Johnson, a 2010 graduate of AFLTS, was ordained Oct. 10 at Faith Free Lutheran, Minneapolis, with Pastor Elden Nelson, AFLC president, officiating. Pictured are Pastor Phil Haugen, Pastor Dave Johnson, Pastor Michael Johnson, Pastor Greg Lenz, Pastor Bob Lee, and Pastor Elden Nelson.



Members of the Association Free Lutheran Bible School's Concert Choir practice in preparation for the Christmas concerts planned for Dec. 11 and 12 on the Plymouth, Minn., campus.

AFLC Schools will host Christmas concerts

The Association Free Lutheran Bible School and Seminary will present a Christmas choral concert Dec. 11 and 12 on the Plymouth, Minn., campus.

The weekend events will feature an evening concert at 7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 11, preceded by a Christmas food sampler from 4 to 6 p.m. in Heritage Hall. On Sunday, Dec. 12, an afternoon concert will

be held at 4 p.m. with a light supper following the concert. An open house will be held in the AFLC administrative office building from 2:30 to 3:30 preceding the concert.

The candlelight concerts will feature the AFLBS Concert Choir and Proclaim Choir, as well as the seminary's men's chorus. The theme for the concerts will focus on "Hope for All Nations."



Students from AFLC congregations throughout the United States and beyond took part in two short-term mission trips in 2010, sponsored by AFLC Student Missions. Eight students went to India (top and middle) and eight students took part in a trip to Lviv, Ukraine (bottom). The students taught Bible classes and worked with local missionaries and native workers.

AFLC Student Missions plans trip to Ecuador

AFLC Student Missions is sponsoring a short-term mission trip during the summer of 2011 to Cuenca, Ecuador. During the three-week experience, students will work with Pastor Darwin and Kirsten Paccha at a youth summer institute. Darwin is a recent graduate of the AFLC's seminary.

The trip, currently scheduled for July 24-Aug. 17, is now open to 12 students ages 15 to 20 years old. The application deadline has been set for Feb. 1, 2011. Cost is set at \$1,600 per student.

Prior to the trip, students will be trained in an oral Bible teaching method, which they will use to lead sessions at the summer institute. Missionaries have expressed a need for mature Christians who desire to grow in their faith alongside those they minister to in Ecuador.

For more information about this trip and to register, visit the Youth Ministry Web site at www.aflc.org/youth.

AFLC Schools seeks new business manager

The AFLC Schools is seeking a full-time business manager after Lyle Guhl announced plans to resign from his position. A job description and more information about the position is available on the AFLBS Web site at www.aflbs.org.

People and Places

On Oct. 31, two AFLC churches in Hagerstown, Md., held their third annual joint Reformation service. The service was held at **St. Paul's Evangelical Free Lutheran**. Worship began with the Reformation favorite, "A Mighty Fortress," led by the St. Paul's choir and Charles Rice, soloist on the saxophone. Pastor Rich Carr, who serves **Christ Community Lutheran**, served as liturgist and celebrant while Pastor Terry Culler, who serves St. Paul's, preached the sermon, "By Faith Alone." Members of both congregations assisted in the service and dinner which followed.

Pastor Tim Johnson and **Pastor David Skordahl** were installed Oct. 17 as senior pastor and assistant pastor, respectively, at Christ the King Lutheran, Pipestone, Minn., with Pastor Elden Nelson, AFLC president, officiating.

Members of First Lutheran, Dillon, Mont., approved a name change for their congregation to **Our Saviour's Lutheran**. The congregation's resolution of affiliation with the AFLC was recently approved by members of the AFLC Coordinating Committee.

Members of **Grace Free Lutheran**, Valley City, N.D., dedicated a new facility on Nov. 7, with Pastor Elden Nelson officiating. The recently purchased building was completely renovated, and includes a sanctuary, fellowship hall, office space and classrooms. The congregation is served by Pastor Steve Mundfrom.

Members of **Victory Free Lutheran**, Park River, N.D., celebrated the congregation's 25th anniversary on Oct. 31.

Members of **Living Word Lutheran**, Eagan, Minn., celebrated the congregation's 25th anniversary on Oct. 10.

Members of the AFLC Coordinating Committee approved a resolution of affiliation from **Christ Lutheran**, Stover, Mo.

AFLC memorials: October

AFLBS

Marlys Lee
Donald Bjorgaard
Grant McLaughlin
Boyd Haagenson (3)
Marian Henderson
Ardena Sund
Lucille Bornholdt
Marilyn Pederson

AFLTS

Marsha Axvig
Boyd Haagenson (3)
Ardena Sund
Selma Larson
Marlys Lee
Kathryn Voiss

General Fund

Irene Beyer

Home Missions

Marcia Robert
Winifred Nelson
Boyd Haagenson
Irene Beyer
Clarice Miller

World Missions

Winifred Nelson
Dwight Lange
Boyd Haagenson (2)
Ardena Sund
Marlys Lee
Sally Larson
Elizabeth Breudenbach
Marilyn Pederson
Hannah Quanbeck
Lois Oscarson

... in honor of

AFLBS & AFLTS

Pastor Robert Lee

Association Retreat Center hosts upcoming events

Free musical event featured this month

A look at upcoming retreats and camps at the Association Retreat Center, Osceola, Wis.

• Silent Prayer Retreat

Dates: Dec. 3-4, with option to include Dec. 5

• Christmas Festival

Presentation of "A Carol," a musical adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

Dates: 7 p.m. on Dec. 10, 11, 17, 18;

3 p.m. on Dec. 11;

4:30 p.m. on Dec. 12, 19

Cost: Free

Dec. 11 events include silent auction, craft sale, bake sale, kids activities, Christmas praise and worship. If anyone has new or handmade items they would like to donate for our Silent Auction please call us at 800-294-2877.

• SIDExSIDE and Sno Daze

Dates: Feb. 4-6, 2011

For more information on these retreats and future camps, contact the ARC by e-mail at arcregistration@centurytel.net or call 800-294-2877. You can also visit the ARC Web site at www.arc-aflc.org for more information.

2011 Ambassador schedule

Volunteer writers are welcome to contact editors

Below is the 2011 schedule for the *Lutheran Ambassador*. Please be in prayer for each issue. Note the deadlines and special emphasis of each issue. If you have an idea regarding a general article, a certain issue or have an interest in writing, please contact the editors. E-mail us at ruthg@aflc.org or call (763) 545-5631.

ISSUE DATE	DEADLINE	ISSUE THEME
January	November 15	Piety
February	December 13	AFLC Schools
March	January 24	Evangelism
April	February 21	Lent/Easter
May	March 21	Personal ministry
June	April 25	Missions
July	May 23	Christian Education
August	June 20	Conference Review
September	July 11	Free Lutheran Youth
October	August 22	Discerning God's will
November	September 26	Reform./Thanksgiving
December	October 24	Advent/Christmas

Please note, information regarding the Annual Conference, scheduled for June 14-17 at the Sioux Falls Christian Schools campus in Sioux Falls, S.D., will be featured in the May issue, with a deadline of March 21. This includes the conference schedule, board and committee nominees, registration and WMF convention schedule and registration information. The conference registration will also be printed in either the March or April issue. Housing information will be printed as soon as it is available.

AFLC BENEVOLENCES Jan. 1-Oct. 31, 2010

FUND	REC'D IN OCTOBER	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	PRIOR YEAR-TO-DATE
General Fund	\$26,491	\$263,339	\$250,065
Evangelism	7,577	106,699	82,048
Youth Ministries	9,100	110,777	73,492
Parish Education	9,986	89,451	82,133
Seminary	23,528	168,107	157,207
Bible School	27,328	359,696	315,887
Home Missions	20,630	323,012	280,667
World Missions	39,192	249,344	208,144
Personal Support	51,161	293,798	341,953
TOTALS	\$214,992	\$1,964,223	\$1,791,595

Contact the individual departments for further information about specific financial needs.

A plan with a purpose

Last year as part of our congregation's Sunday school Christmas program, three of the most adorable little girls in the world were dressed up as angels. They were all close to 2 years old at the time. As is often the case with little ones of that age, these three tend to be full of energy and curiosity.

The plan was for the littlest angels to stand up front and look cute while some Bible verses were read and a song was sung. When you're 2, it's pretty hard to stand in one place for more than a few seconds. The costume the person next to you is wearing looks interesting and you want to see what it feels like and maybe give it a pull. There is a microphone sitting on the floor



Pastor Craig Johnson

that nobody is using. You want to talk in it and hear what sounds come out. Pastor lets you do it other times. Why can't you do it now?

My job was to record the program. I wasn't prepared to record such high-speed action. The angels and some of the others were bouncing up and down and all around. The video ended up having a lot of scenes of kids in the picture and then quickly out of it.

The filming didn't go all that well. The kids didn't stay perfectly still and in place. They are great kids and they were being good. They were just being kids. The program didn't go exactly like we planned.

But the message got across and everybody enjoyed it.

Christmas celebrations can be a lot like that program. They go by quickly. They often don't go as we plan. We try to organize them and maintain control of things, but the unexpected keeps happening.

The event we celebrate at Christmas was like that for Mary and Joseph. They certainly didn't plan to have a baby while Mary was still a virgin. Mary never expected to be the mother of the Messiah. Having the baby in Bethlehem wasn't their idea. They didn't want their baby's first bed to be a manger.

Things didn't go according to Mary and Joseph's plans. But it all happened just as the Lord planned.

The little angels in our program didn't do things exactly according to the script. God regularly does things that aren't according to our script. When Jesus was born people were looking for a Messiah, but not a Messiah who would be placed in a manger and later nailed to a cross. In their script the Messiah saved them from the Romans. God's plan was much bigger and better. He sent Jesus to "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21, NIV). He continues to regularly surprise us with a more wonderful plan for our lives than we could ever conceive.

"Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails" (Proverbs 19:21). It is okay to make plans,

but we need to remember God may have other ideas, and He knows best. The Lord often deviates from our script and does the unexpected. We get sick at what seems to be an inconvenient time, but we meet someone in the doctor's waiting room who we're able to encourage. The neighbor who moves in next door appears to be somebody we could never get along with. A surprising friendship develops that results in us introducing the neighbor to Jesus.

It's okay to make plans, but we need to remember God may have other ideas, and He knows best. The Lord often deviates from our script and does the unexpected.

The little angels didn't understand everything that was going on with the Christmas program, but they enjoyed being a part of it. The rest of us are more like them than we sometimes realize. We don't understand everything that God is doing in the present. We're going to be surprised by things He does in the future. He gives us a part in the program. We get to share the good news with the world that the Savior has come. With childlike wonder let's enjoy playing our part. And remember, there are going to be great treats at the end.

something to share

Regarding Christ

BY AMBER DAHL

Have you ever been falsely accused or had your reputation called into question, knowing you were innocent or misunderstood? The first thing you want to do is to right the other's view of your reputation, isn't it? It's painful to be thought about in a tainted view, especially if it could hurt your witness for Christ or your character.

So, what do we do when such things happen to us? The Bible promises that we *will be slandered* on account of Christ. I Peter 3:14-16 says, "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you, for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame."

Recently I was slandered while ministering in our county jail. A woman accused me in front of our Bible study group of not keeping my word to visit with her. She spun the wording to make me look untrustworthy. Instantly, the attitude of the group soured against me. I wanted nothing more than to defend myself and right my reputation, yet the Lord helped me. Instead of pointing out that her claims were unfounded, I simply told the lady I was truly sorry and asked her when I could visit with her later that day.

Usually I keep my emotions at bay while I'm in the jail, but at

that moment tears flooded my eyes as I told the inmates, "I know I will let you down from time to time. I don't want to, but I will. That is why you must put your hope in Jesus Christ because He always keeps His promises, and He will never let you down."

During the remainder of our lesson, the mood remained a bit more somber than usual; the hurting woman eventually left the group. At the end of the lesson, God's grace shined through my weaknesses with His power by bringing three ladies to Himself through faith in Christ and baptism.

No one likes to be humbled, especially in front of a group. "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble,'" we are reminded in I Peter 5:5.

A new sister in Christ reminded me at the end of Bible study, "Remember when someone is hurting, it is easier for them to take that hurt out on someone else."

I nodded my thanks for her gracious, wise words.

In this situation, I'm regarding Christ Jesus as my example. "When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly" (I Peter 2:23).

Dahl, who is a member of St. Paul's Free Lutheran, Fargo, N.D., volunteers in a ministry at a women's prison.