



# THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

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### The Lutheran Ambassador

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### AN ENCOURAGING WORD

### The best Christmas pageant

y parents tell me that the Sunday school Christmas program was a significant event years ago. It included simple recitations and songs. The children received some candy or fruit, prized treats during the Great Depression. The church was packed.

Times change. We still have Sunday school programs, but they have become lesser events on an overstuffed community calendar. Parents and a few grandparents attend, but the church may not be filled. The children get a bag of candy, but it is no longer a special treat. This is "post-Christian" urban America.

Most of my ministry has been in rural or "bush" churches. The Sunday school has not been large, but it was still important to the community. At Christmas time these country churches are decorated like picture postcards. The fifth or sixth grade Mary and Joseph are surrounded by 5- to 10-year-old wise men and angels in burlap costume. Aromatic coffee and goodies make it pleasantly hard to concentrate. People laugh and cry as the children dramatize the story once again and "Silent Night" is sung in candlelight ambiance. Christmas doesn't get much cozier than that.

My most memorable Christmas pageant was in South Naknek, Alaska, in 1998. The sagging old building was quite cold and bleakly undecorated. This was the only time we attempted to heat the uninsulated fishermen's chapel during the winter. We tried to get village parents to come out or send their children to the program. A few children showed up on time. Without rehearsal, we put on the pageant for the four or five parents that came.

With a borrowed box of costumes, a white Mary, a native

Joseph and a mixed variety of angels and shepherds, the stage was set. I read the Luke text, and when their part came we guided actors forward to take their place around the wooden manger. Tardy children dribbled into the chapel throughout the program, and we hastily threw an angel or wise man outfit over them and sent them up front to "the stable."

My autoharp was the "pipe organ" that accompanied the ancient carols. A few feeble voices praised the newborn King. Afterwards, we enjoyed some cookies, juice and coffee that we had hauled over in the single-engine airplane.

Every Sunday school program has been special, but that unique attempt at having a Christmas pageant in South Naknek stands out for some reason. Perhaps it was the most like the first Christmas in Bethlehem: poor facilities, unknown people, no rehearsal and relative obscurity.

I don't know what will happen to the Sunday school pageants in the future, but I do know that no matter what this vain, unbelieving world does with the gospel they cannot stop the Baby of Bethlehem from gathering souls from all nations and coming back in glory to reign. Like those Christmas pageants from my parents' generation, that will be a significant event with good attendance. "And He shall reign forever and ever ..." (Revelation 11:15).

— Pastor Tom Olson St. Paul's Lutheran Cloquet, Minn.



### **OUR PRESIDENT WRITES**

### **Pastor Robert Lee**

or a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

"Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name

which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

What's in a name? Today people may choose a name for their child because they like the sound of it. Some bear a family name that has passed from generation to

generation, while others are named for celebrities or fictional characters. Parents may even create new names for their newborns.

In the Bible, however, a name often expresses the nature of the one who bears it, describing his character, position, some circumstance affecting him, or some hope or sorrow concerning him. There was a sense of identity between the name and its bearer, so that declaring one's name was a means of revealing himself.

There is nothing magical about the name of Jesus; it is simply who He is. His name represents His power and authority, and eternal life comes through His name. Those who follow Him are to be baptized into His name, to preach the gospel in His name, and pray to the Father in His name. The words above from the letter to the Philippians declare that every knee will bow at His name someday and every tongue will confess that He is Lord.

The name of our holiday, Christmas, bears the name of our Savior and Lord. Jesus Christ is what Christmas is all about. May we celebrate the season this year with renewed reverence, and enter the new year with renewed zeal to declare His name to the nations!





Did Mary have reason to fear? More than I can imagine. More than any of us can claim in our own lives. We don't live in a society where adultery can end in death. Mary did. Divorce wouldn't necessarily mean the end of a prosperous life for me. It would have for Mary. My family wouldn't reject me. Mary's, very likely, would have. Beyond the social implications of having a child out of wedlock, Mary was given the ultimate task. I will never be asked to be the mother of the Son of God. Mary was.

Yet, before Mary even had a chance to let fear take hold of her, God gave her an extra measure of blessing.

R. C. H. Lenski, in his *Interpretation of St.* Luke's Gospel, writes, "The Lord is with thee' is more than the ordinary helpful presence of God. ... By becoming the virgin mother of God's son, Mary would most certainly need the fullest protection on the part of God. How could she defend herself against slander, and how could she protect the babe from murderous hands? So in advance, before Mary is further enlightened, the assurance of the Lord's presence, help and protection is given to her."

When the angel said, "The Lord is with thee," it wasn't just a wishful greeting, like saying, "God bless you." It was a statement of fact. God had this extra measure of blessing to go along with the grace He would give her in being the mother of His child. And Mary had this blessing all along. Hadn't God written down every day of Mary's life before one of them came to be?

Because Mary found grace with God, she could stop fearing.

Then the angel told her about her Son, the One who would deliver her people. The One who would sit on the throne of David. The One whose kingdom would never end. The Messiah.

Can you imagine feeling a bit humble at this point? A bit overwhelmed with the responsibility? Though wondering at how it could happen, Mary believed. She trusted God. She said, "Lo, the slavemaid of the Lord! May it be to me according to thy utterance" (vs. 38).

Leon Morris, in New Testament Commentaries: *Luke*, writes, "Mary could not be sure that she would not have to suffer, perhaps even die. But she recognized the will of God and accepted it."

Once the angel was gone, Mary could have relapsed into fear. She had the Word from God; she had His extra blessing, which enabled her to believe. But now she had to face Joseph. She had to face her family. She had to face the people she saw every day. What would they think? Would Joseph leave her?

As it turns out, she didn't have a thing to worry about. Didn't God directly intervene with Joseph in his dream? Didn't Elisabeth rejoice with her before Mary could say anything beyond a greeting?

"And it came to pass when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe in her womb leaped, and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (vs. 41).

I think God gave Mary an extra blessing with Elisabeth. It wasn't just a strange coincidence that Mary's own kinswoman would be the mother of John, the man who would foretell the coming of Jesus. And it wasn't just a coincidence that Elisabeth's pregnancy would be such a miracle in itself. As an older woman, Elisabeth was a perfect companion to Mary. She could dole out advice and marvel along with Mary at the wonder of becoming a mother.

Family, at times, can be the worst critics. They can be unforgiving if they sense they will be shamed by a kinsman's actions. But instead of criticism, Elisabeth greeted Mary with joy. Even more, she reassured Mary of the angel's prophecy.

"And blessed she that did believe, for there shall be completion for the things that have been spoken to her from the Lord" (vs. 45).

Mary must have laughed at herself. Here she was

trying to figure out how to explain being the mother of Jesus. She finally gets to Elisabeth's home only to find that God had blessed her once again. He answered Mary's fear before she had a chance to address it herself. So she praised God.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has exulted in God, my

Hadn't God written down every day of Mary's life before one of them came to be?

Savior, because he looked graciously on the humble estate of his servant ... His mercy is from generation to generation to those who fear him ..." (vs. 46, 50).

In place of anxiety is a new kind of fear: A reverence for God. Lenski writes, "It denotes the awe which fills the heart and reflects itself in the bearing of those who recognize aright God's majesty and greatness."

I'd like to think that Mary kept Psalm 94 close to her heart. After all, hadn't God sent His Word directly to her? "When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul" (vs. 19).

No, I will never be asked to do what Mary did. But when I do face situations beyond my strength, I know that, like Mary, God is waiting for me there with an extra measure of grace.

> Ruth Gunderson Assistant Editor





verything seemed to be going as planned. As a young man Joseph had learned the skills of carpentry. No doubt he enjoyed working with his hands. His delight was shaping and finishing good wood into a beautiful and sturdy piece of furniture or as part of a larger project such as a dwelling or an out building. As he worked his mind often planned for the day when he and Mary would be married. He had made that commitment with a deep sense of responsibility. His desire was to be a good provider, a faithful and loving husband and — if God would allow — a proud father.

Then Mary tells him of her secret. She is with child, and her child is of the Holy Spirit. Fear gripped his mind. How could he ever explain such a thing to his family, friends and customers? His reputation would be ruined. His business would suffer. Future opportunities for marriage would be diminished if not totally destroyed. There were restless nights, days in the shop when he couldn't remember the last measurement taken, and conversations with old friends that seemed to drift off and be left hanging.

How could the one he loved expect him to believe such a story? Had an angel truly visited her, or had she been unfaithful? He had question after question, doubt after doubt, and fear upon fear.

He looked for a way out of this embarrassing situation. Maybe he could secretly put her away, and try to reestablish his reputation, business and friendships in this little village of Nazareth. But he was afraid. The future was so uncertain; his hopes, his dreams and his plans bit by bit, piece by piece were being cast upon the scrap pile of bad experienc-

In the dark of night and deep sleep a voice speaks, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, for what is conceived in her is from the Holy

The message was for him; it was prefaced with his name, "Joseph, Son of David." He awoke and realized that an angel had spoken as God's messenger. The message was so sweet. His fears were dispelled. Matthew 1:24 tells us that "when Joseph awoke he did what the angel commanded him and took Mary home as his wife." And into that home a child was born. As a stepfather, Joseph's responsibilities were real and heavy. He had been given the responsibility of rearing God's Son, the One that would save his people.

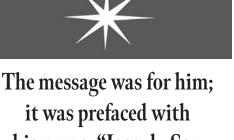
If we haven't yet been at that scrap pile of shat-

tered dreams and plans, it is very possible and probable that we will be there sometime in the future. Great men of the Scripture like Jacob, Moses, David and Paul faced fear and so will we. As Christians we have been given great responsibility. We have been told to "Go and make disciples." We have been told that we are "salt and light," and we tremble at the awesome responsibility that is ours as members of the family of God.

Yes, fear often grips the mind and heart of even a righteous man. It is not very likely that when we are struck with fear we will be able to fall off to

sleep, dream as Joseph did and hear a message that will take away our fears. We, too, need to hear the messenger speak those words, "Do not be afraid." And He speaks those words through the Holy Word. However, the words of love, forgiveness, assurance and hope that came to Joseph were believed by him because as we read in Matthew 1:9, "Joseph was a righteous man."

Those words of comfort and encouragement



his name, "Joseph, Son of David." He awoke and realized that an angel had spoken as God's messenger. The message was so sweet. His fears were dispelled.

come only to those who are in a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Joseph's heart was ready for the good word the angel spoke. He was willing and ready to obey that which the angel of the Lord commanded. Are our hearts ready to receive and obey Him as He speaks? Yes, Joseph was concerned with what others would think and say. But he was much more concerned with what God said. He let the Word rule in his heart and life. Though not yet written, Joseph knew the truth of the words of the apostle John as recorded in I John 4:18, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

> — Elden Nelson AFLC Vice President





"And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people" (Luke 2:9, 10 KJV).

ear not. It isn't the first time this sentence appears in Scripture, nor is it the last. It's such a familiar part of the Christmas story that it's easy not to take the shepherds' fear seriously, not to mention the angel's reassurance.

One year, the Christmas concert at my college was narrated by a young man with a rich, booming baritone voice, just right for the role. I winced, though, when he said the words, "and they were sore afraid," because he said them in a sappy, condescending tone which said, "Oh, the poor little shepherdy-poohs are scared."

If any of us saw a real angel face-to-face, I think we would be stunned and in urgent need of reassurance. We would not look down on the shepherds for being "sore afraid," because we would be terrified ourselves. The same is true if we come to a knowledge of our own sin and our need for the Savior. In either case, the LORD is more than happy to take our fears and our need seriously. In this light, let us explore a few cases in which the phrase "fear not" appears in the Bible.

In Isaiah 35:4 we read, "Say to them that are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, fear not: behold your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense; he will come and save you." We see here a pattern starting to emerge: God doesn't just tell us "fear not," He gives us a good reason not to fear. It always, always has to do with the fact that He is coming as Savior. We see this in Genesis 15:1, the first place where "fear not" appears in the Bible: "After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision saying, 'Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward."

Can you imagine what it would be like to have the LORD come to you in a vision? Would you feel ready? For Abram it was probably like having a surprise inspection or pop quiz, only 10,000 times 10,000 as scary. God knew Abram needed reassurance, and He was more than happy to give it to him.

Abram also had fears that he would not become the father of a great nation, as he had been promised, so God reassured him of that as well: "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if thou be able to number them.' And he said unto him,' So shall thy seed be.' And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15:5,6).

We need God's promise to soothe our fears, and we need God's promise to ground us in faith. God is more than happy to give us His promise, so our fears, too, may be cast away by faith. I John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear." It is His perfect love that motivates Him to deal with our fears, in such a way that they are overcome by His promises.

Joseph, too, had fears. He feared that Mary, his betrothed, had been unfaithful. He feared that her life and his would be marred by scandal if he took her to be his wife. He feared that she would become a "public example," and he wanted her to be protected instead. The LORD took Joseph's fears seriously, too, and sent His angel with a message of Jesus' salvation (Matthew 1:20,21). Once again there was a solid, concrete reason given why he didn't have to be afraid. Once again it had to do with the LORD's salvation

When God tells us "fear not," He then calls us to take a step of faith based upon His reassuring promise. For Joseph it was to go ahead and take Mary as his wife. They may have still experienced gossip or ill will from people who suspected the worst. But Joseph not only had nothing to fear from the angel, he had nothing to fear as he went forward in obedience to God's will.

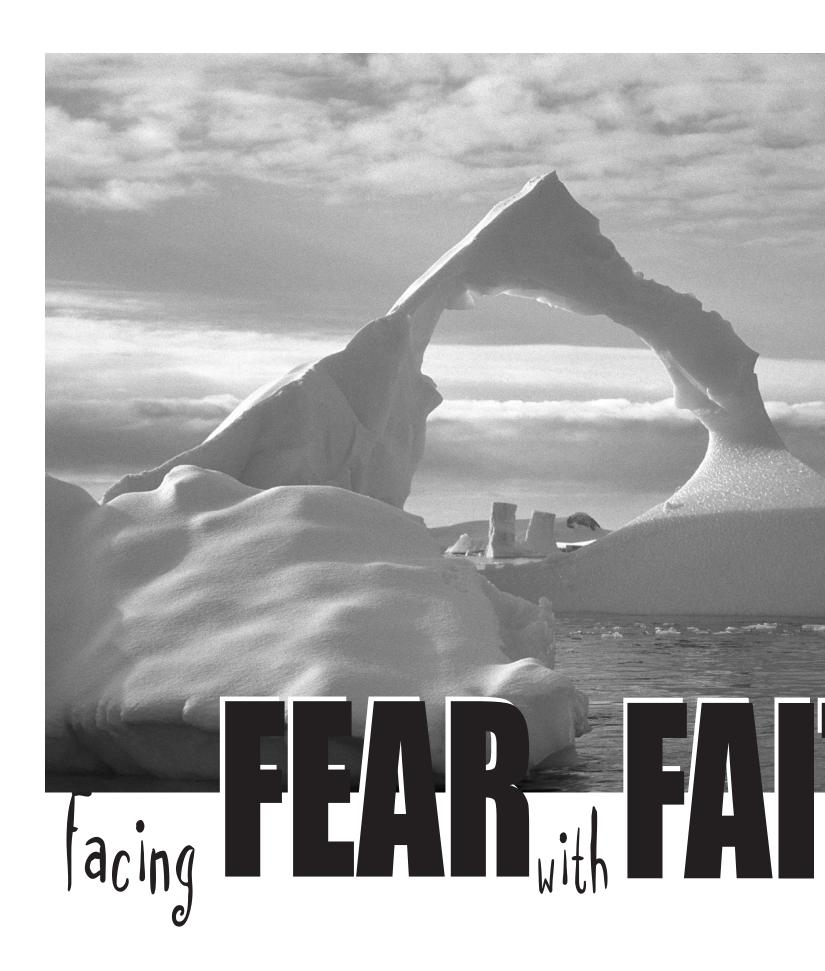
For the shepherds, the step of faith was first to go find the newborn Savior and worship Him; then, to tell everyone what they had seen. "And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child" (Luke 2:17).

Some people might have thought it silly or embarrassing when a bunch of shepherds started going around saying, "Angels appeared to us while we were out with the sheep, and told us that the Messiah was born, and we found him in a barn!" Let's admit it. If we had been there to hear it for the first time, we might have thought it sounded a bit far-fetched. But that no longer bothered the shepherds. Their fear of the angel had been replaced by a strong faith in the Savior whom they had seen, and this faith made them fearless of what anybody thought as they spread the good news. Once again, perfect love casts out fear. The shepherds loved the Savior, and they loved their neighbors enough to share the wonderful news, even though they may have brought some ridicule upon themselves in the process.

We may not see an angel face-to-face, but the LORD brings us face-to-face with His power and righteousness with His message that says, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). This message is to be taken seriously. We thank Him for the rest of the verse, which soothes our fears as by grace we trust in the Savior: "But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

> — Pastor Michael Peterson Ortley Free Lutheran Ortley, S.D.







he prophet Isaiah warned King Ahaz, ruler of the kingdom of Judah, not to form an alliance with Assyria, but he ignored Isaiah, and eventually Judah fell into the Babylonian captivity. It was a dark period of history for Judah. Yet God graciously spoke a word of hope to rebellious Judah: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2).

Isaiah also wrote, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6). Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of

these promises. He speaks a word of hope and faith to all who face the darkness of sin and death.

In October I stood by the casket of Kathy Olinger, not only officiating at her funeral, but also saying goodbye to a loved friend. Recently, my wife and I received the news that her father has cancer. Sometimes it feels like a dark fog has surrounded me, and I struggle with feelings of fear, loss and anger. I, too, look to Isaiah's words for comfort and hope, that "those living in the land of the shadow of death" will see the light of Christ.

I have discovered that my faith does not make all my fears go away, but that it enables me to face them. A favorite quote that I read long ago goes like this: "Courage is not the absence of fear; it is the conquest of fear." The apostle John wrote, "This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith" (I John 5:4). Our faith in Christ assures us that we can live victoriously in the midst of a dark and dreary world, beset with fears and sor-

We have been looking at the book of Philippians during our Wednesday morning Bible study. The apostle Paul writes

while under house arrest, very likely chained to a Roman guard around the clock. These were very discouraging circumstances that could cause even the most ardent believer to lose hope. But listen to some of Paul's words: "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel" (Philippians 1:12). "The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (vs. 18). Finally, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation ... I can do everything through him (Christ) who gives me strength" (Philippians 4: 11,13)

We live in a society that demands and rewards instant gratification. As a result,

> this thinking may creep into the church, and we may begin to demand that God bring us instant relief from our suffering and sorrow. Yet God is more interested in strengthening our character, and deepening our faith in Christ. God wants us to grow in holiness rather than happiness. Without sounding callous and unfeeling, may I suggest that you view your faith in Christ not as something to take away your fear and sorrow, but as a relationship to help you face your fear and sorrow. Remember that Christ is with you during this difficult journey.

Isaiah's message offers us genuine comfort. Though we live in a world where we may experience fear and sorrow, our hope is in Christ Himself. This Christmas season cherish your faith in Christ. It will help you face your greatest fears.

> — Pastor Joel Lohafer Triumph Lutheran Ferndale, Wash.

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# Growing into Career into Care 12 THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

nna Grace hung up the phone. She looked through the window at the darkened park beyond her backvard. A tear slid down her cheek and onto her lips. She licked the salty wetness and sighed. They were not coming. At least the children were in bed and would not see her sadness.

It was really beyond sadness. It was an ache inside ... deep inside. Another Christmas alone. Her husband would work Christmas Eve and again Christmas morning. All the excitement of the coming holidays drained. It would be a chore — a chore to take on the responsibility of baking, decorating, shopping and the pressure of making memorable moments "happen" for her small brood. In the past she had tried to invite others over for their Christmas, but soon discovered they had their routines and families. Many of her friends claimed they envied her, but she knew after a few holidays without their loved ones they would long for them as she did.

You would think after 15 years she would have gotten used to it. When the kids were young she had not been as lonely for family. Their innocent excitement about Jesus' birthday was enough for them and for her. They were happy and she was tired. Yet as they grew she became more and more aware of the physical distance between herself and her family. She felt more and more pressure to make memories that would last for them: special memories, traditions. Without family to help make those memories it became even more important to her to find a way to make each Christmas something magical. Hadn't she just seen a headline on the family magazine at the dentist today that announced: "How to make this your children's most memorable Christmas ever!"

Fear crept into her heart. The last few years it had become an unwanted companion during this eventful season. Fear that she could not accomplish the perfect Christmas. Fear that she had lost sight of the real meaning of Christ's coming, and fear of being alone in front of the fire Christmas Eve.

Anna knew she had no right to these feelings. There were many who had lost loved ones in their church congregation this year. She knew she had a loving husband and children to be thankful for. She knew she was compensating, and she knew her tendency to martyr herself. Her mother said she had inherited it from an aunt — right down to the way she crinkled her nose when she felt overwhelmed by self-pity.

"How sad you look my little one," her mamma would say, and smile at her stubbornness.

Where was that grace her mama claimed she was named for? She said it was a prophecy, something she would grow into as she grew in her knowledge of God.

Anna opened her Bible and read Luke 4:18: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Because He has

anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

She was being held captive by her emotions, her expectations and her fears and missing out on the whole point of the celebration of Christ's birth. The focus was wrong. It was not the preparation but the accomplishment. It was not the wedding but the marriage.

She shared all of these thoughts reluctantly with her Bible study group the next day. She said she had been thinking about the fruits of the Spirit they had been studying, particularly faithfulness and self-control. The Holy Spirit had done its convicting, and she was struggling with the yielding. As they studied Proverbs 25:28, "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls," and Proverbs 16:32, "He who is slow to anger

is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city," she realized she had a choice. She could yield to the Spirit and allow Christ to control her emotions, or she could ignore His loving hand and wallow in her own fears and loneliness.

She chose to yield, and she prayerfully kept on yielding because her struggle did not disappear with

She could yield to the Spirit and allow Christ to control her emotions, or she could ignore His loving hand and wallow in her own fears and loneliness.

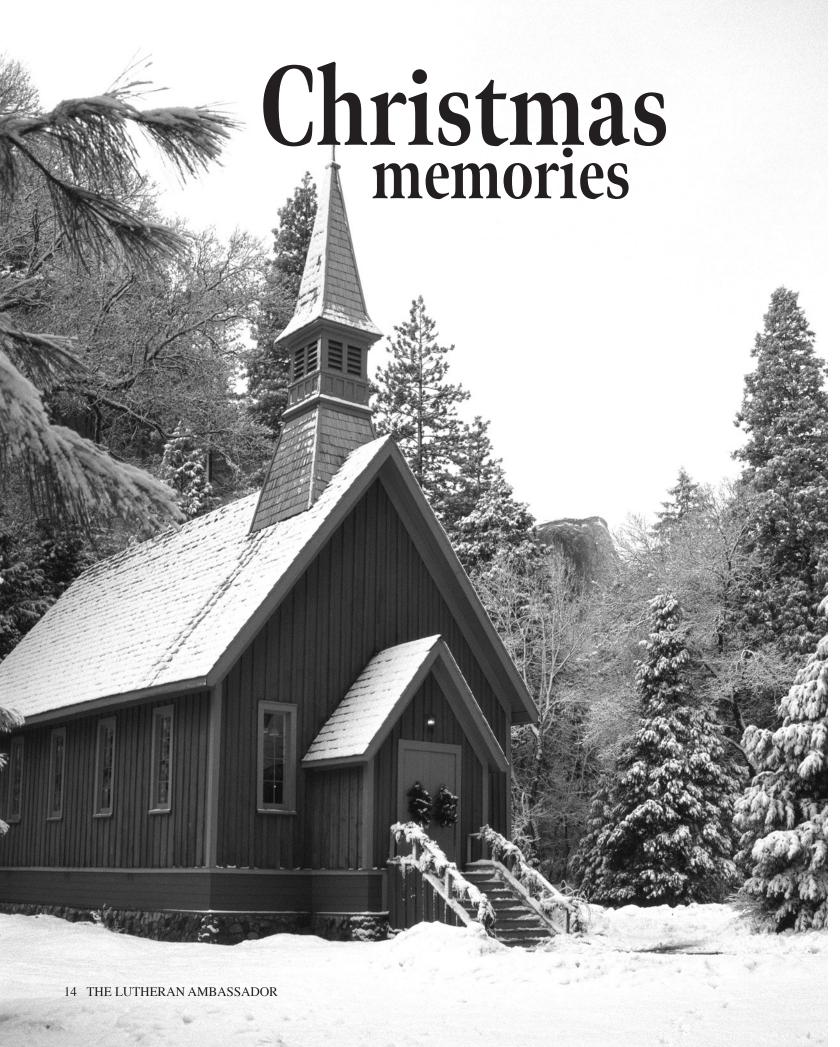
her admission of it. Together with her Bible study group they prayed Anna Grace into the New Year. She spent more time in the Word of God. She spent more time with her kids. She quit isolating herself with her to-do list and made her expectations more realistic.

Anna changed that Christmas. She grew in her understanding of His love, His joy, His peace, faithfulness and self-control. She was alone physically, but spiritually He had made His presence known.

There had been no Christmas miracle. No family appeared at her door unexpectedly, no light from heaven, no bright star. But Anna Grace had chosen to yield, and God had been faithful and helped her grow into her given name: Grace. Through her obedience she had experienced His grace. Her mamma would be proud.

> — Kristin Molstre Ruthfred Lutheran Bethel Park, Pa.





ur family lived on a farm between Garden City and Radcliffe, Iowa. My first Christmas memory was of attending a Sunday school program at the Stevanger Lutheran Church in Garden City in 1913. It must have been a very mild winter with no snow, as Father had driven his Maxwell car to church. It was an open touring car with buttoned-on-side curtains for protection, and no heater. We children were wrapped in old quilts or blankets and a black Norwegian shawl was tied over our heads and shoulders.

The Christmas tree looked huge, ablaze with candles. It was the first Christmas tree I'd seen. We didn't have beautiful wrapping papers, so the gifts, with nametags, were placed beneath the tree. Each child who took part in the program (if the parent had brought a gift) could receive a present. Children did not start Sunday school until they were in first grade. Mother had explained to me that my sister, Charlotte, who was five years older, would receive a gift. I must wait until I was older. When her name was called, she received a beautiful doll with a china head, red hair and eyes that opened and closed. It was the only doll she ever owned. I thought it was wonderful and longed to grow older so I could receive a gift. Fortunately, this custom was later discontinued as some children's feelings were hurt when their parents couldn't afford to buy gifts for them.

The first recitation I memorized was not mine nor given in public by me. The teacher, Carrie Skrovig, had sent home a recitation about Santa Claus with my brother, Orven. My parents strongly objected to having us learn that lie. My older sister, Hattie, found a religious poem for him to learn. I listened to him practice his piece and learned it, too. I have learned and forgotten many things in these 92 years, but these words linger on.

Why do bells of Christmas ring, Why do little children sing? Once a lovely, shining star, Seen by shepherd from afar, Shone until its light Made a lowly manger bright. Then a darling baby lay Pillowed soft upon the hay, And its mother sang and smiled, "This is Christ the Holy Child." Therefore bells of Christmas ring, Therefore little children sing.

Christmas Eve afternoon, Father and my bachelor uncle, Cornelius, would go to Radcliffe to do their Christmas shopping. The storekeepers were anxious to dispose of their remaining Christmas merchandise, so they would sell at a big discount. We children knew they had gone to town and waited

impatiently for their return, as we were certain they'd buy something for us.

If at all possible, a child would receive a new dress or other garment to wear for the Christmas program, which was given between Christmas and New Year's. Sometimes it was a hand-me-down refurbished with a new collar or cuffs. Toys were often homemade. Mother had knit mittens and caps and long stockings for the men.

The previous fall, when Mother's fat, old hens quit laying eggs, she had sold them. If the price was good, we knew we'd get some new clothes. She would go to Sands Brothers General Store and buy remnants. Then Hattie would cleverly make a beautiful dress out of two different pieces.

My most vivid memories, which I relive every Christmas, were of seeing Mother scrubbing the kitchen floor on her hands and knees after all other

preparations were done. And the aroma of the Gomme (a Norwegian dessert), gently simmering for hours.

Time seemed to stand still. To me, it seemed the longest day of the year. Finally, it was time to do the chores. Mother went to pick the eggs. Father slopped the pigs. The boys, Henry, Clarence, Theodore and Orven, put down hay, fed the animals hay, corn or grain and milked the cows by

Then we again gathered around the dining room table and Father read the Christmas gospel in Norwegian, gave a prayer and we all sang "Gladelig Jul, Deilige Jul." Then off to bed, a final chorus of, "Goodnight Ma, goodnight Pa." A silent night. A holy night.

hand. Charlotte and I hauled wood for the kitchen stove. Hattie and Mother prepared the supper.

After supper, the gifts were distributed. We were thrilled to receive an inexpensive toy or game and something to wear. Then we again gathered around the dining room table and Father read the Christmas gospel in Norwegian, gave a prayer and we all sang "Gladelig Jul, Deilige Jul." Then off to bed, a final chorus of, "Goodnight Ma, goodnight Pa." A silent night. A holy night.

I thank God for memories such as these.

— Ordella Walker Arneson Minneapolis, Minn.



# Let not your Carts be troubled

"Sjømandsmissionens Julehefte" By Ingard Henricksen Translated by Raynard Huglen

hristmas was in the air. Not with sifting snow and jingling bells. No, there was a Christmas mood that only London can show. A yellow mist polluted the air in waves over the rooftops, and a greasy, sticky mess of soot and filth covered the asphalt of the streets and sidewalks. Busses and automobiles inched themselves forward like gray ghosts, and people who otherwise were very busy looked as if they played blind man's bluff beside the house walls. But if one was well acquainted with the great city's many nooks and corners, he would get himself to the Covent Garden market, and there he would be sure to find in the thick London air the unmistakable odors of Christmas.

Long rows of spruce trees in all sizes stood branched out, yet closely crowded and dripping with moisture along the walls of the large halls. On the flower shop's bulletin board were shown the red berries of holly like small burning flames among the fresh green leaves. In the midst of them lay mounds of modest mistletoes. Each little sprig and each berry carried a golden dream, which Christmas could unfold for two hearts — if fortune were good and hearts pure.

Also at the large seaman's hospital in Greenwich

one could find something of the Christmas spirit. Everything high and low was being washed, scrubbed and polished. Nurses hurried silently through the hallways and were busy with many mysterious preparations. But in the pale faces of the sick in their rooms, suffering and illness laid its silent hand over the busyness. Everything had a strange stillness about it.

In a small, private room laid a young, light-haired boy. His face was gaunt and glowing with fever, but two clear blue eyes stared thoughtfully into space. There were certainly many strange thoughts, which filled Ivar's head today. Yesterday he had received the news that he had long suspected — he was going to die; the doctors couldn't do anything more. He was lying and waiting for the seaman's pastor now.

Oh, how often had he thanked God because He had sent someone he could talk with about his cares and the many burning questions on his heart. One who was so loving and gentle had taken him by the hand and led him to heaven's portal. Yesterday afternoon he had received the Lord's Supper, and since then he had felt himself so wonderfully safe and at peace. In the quiet of the night the fear of death had crept in a couple of times to him, but then he had





simply whispered the words the pastor had read for him before he declared the forgiveness of his sins: "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:1-3).

But how will Mother take this? He knew that the seaman's pastor had telegraphed home yesterday afternoon that the situation was hopeless. He didn't get further in his thinking because from out in the hallway he heard the pastor's familiar and dear steps. "How are things, little Ivar?" the pastor softly and carefully touched the blonde head upon the pillow. "By the way, I have a big piece of good news for you." He laid an open telegram down in the thin white hands. "It came this morning and tells that your mother is on her way to London."

"Mother is coming — Mother is coming!" Maybe he had heard wrong, but no, on the little piece of paper were written in large, plain letters: "Travel today via Goteberg direct to London. Ivar's mother." A radiant smile shone over the wan face, and in the large blue eyes was kindled a light, which better than words told of the great joy that filled his mind and thoughts.

Out in the afternoon the next day the pastor sat again by Ivar's bed, while his wife was on her way to Tilbury to meet the boy's mother. In the little sick room the ceiling light was off, only a little lamp with a green shade gave light on the wall back of the bed.

The pastor held one of the patient's fever-hot hands in his own. Silently, and concerned, he watched the pal-

lid face. Would he live one more hour? His eyes were closed and it seemed that the little that was left of life ebbed out with each pulse beat. There was a period of deep silence. Then Ivar opened his eyes; large and trustingly they sought the pastor.

"What time is it?" The voice was weak but clear.

"It's five o'clock."

"Then Mother has arrived on land!" Then after a lapse of time there came again, "Now she is driving through the city — she will be here soon now."

Thus it was that for each minute it was as though the ailing body was being infused with new strength from hidden, mysterious wells. There was the love, which for a while conquered the perishable. All senses were focused on that one — Mother. Ears listened for her footsteps, eyes looked for her beloved form in the doorway, and the whole fever-wracked body



yearned for her warm and strong arms. The minutes went by, an hour — she should have been here long before.

But out on the Thames lay a great passenger ship and it sounded in the fog. Slowly ahead — stop incessant shifting in the engine. On the bridge stood the pilot. He had a great desire to drop the anchors; it was very doubtful if they would get through the locks at the dock, even if they could get there safely. But, he had promised to continue on as long as there was a possibility.

"Hasn't she come yet?" His glance searched around the little room. "I am ... so tired, now I think ... I don't have long ... again."

"No, my boy, Mother hasn't come yet, but Jesus is coming soon, and then you will get to meet Mother at home with Him. Are you fearful of dying?"

"Fearful? No, I would like to go home to Jesus, but I would like to live — for Mother's sake. She will be — so sad. Oh, read those verses in John 14."

Softly and tenderly the beautiful words rang out one more time: "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, and trust in me."

The head nurse came in. She stood soberly and touched by the side of the pastor. "He doesn't have long now, Pastor."

Some minutes of deep silence went by. Then they saw Ivar move his lips and almost inaudibly he whispered, "The Lord — is my Shepherd — I shall — not want."

One more time the deep, childlike eyes beamed at

the pastor, then closed.

An hour later Ivar's mother came. The seaman's pastor greeted her in the office of the head nurse. She took the blow remarkably calmly. She only asked that she could go alone into the room where death had come. What struggle she fought through there no one got to know, but the pastor couple noticed that when she came out again there shone in her countenance the same peace as that which stamped the boy's at death. But she came with Ivar's opened Bible in her hand; she had taken it from the nightstand, where the pastor had laid it open after he used it. Quietly and softly, she said, "It is hard to lose what one has held dear in the world, Pastor, but one cannot sorrow when one receives a word of farewell like this. It was as if the Savior Himself whispered these words in my ear in there with Ivar." She pointed to John 14.

They stood together, the pastor, his wife and the lonely mother, by the open window. The fog had lifted, and on the other side of the Thames the uncountable lights of the worldly city blinked and a far-off sound of the streets' and harbor's noise reached them. But near by, the Greenwich Church evening clock chimed. Deep and rich the tones went toward heaven; high over the world's noise and restlessness, its sorrow and bereavement they rose. Low, as if to himself, the pastor said, "Let not your hearts be troubled! Believe in God, and believe in me! Sursum Corda! Lift up your hearts!"

# The Christ child is coming



## **CELEBRATING 40 Years**

### **AFLC** commemorates anniversary with commissioned art

To help commemorate the AFLC's 40th anniversary, its members commissioned a painting, which was on display at the anniversary celebration Oct. 26-27 in Thief River Falls, Minn.

Painted by Pastor Ken Thoreson, Argyle, Minn., the painting illustrates people and issues important to the founding of the AFLC.

Prints of the painting are available for sale. Fill out the order form below and send to Parables in Chalk, c/o Ken and Marilyn Thoreson, PO Box 261, Argyle, MN 56713. For more information, call (218) 437-8483.



Cherry frame, suede mat, conservation glass	Oak frame, regular mat, conservation glass	Prints shrink wrapped on foam core	Please list complete street address if you want your order delivered by means other than the U.S. Postal Service (UPS is the norm)
22" X 30"	22" X 30"	22" X 30"	Name:
\$440	\$306	\$100	
18" X 24"	18" X 24"	18" X 24"	City:
\$360	\$220	\$72	
13.5" X 18"	13.5" X 18"	13.5" X 18"	State:Phone:
\$240	\$168	\$48	
	Please circle choice		

### Gloria Dei raises funds for FLS through relay

Members of Gloria Dei Lutheran, St. Louis, Mo., recently conducted their second annual marathon relay walk, soliciting pledges for their efforts. The congregation seeks a worthy cause for the funds from the marathon relay each year, and this year they supported the Association Free Lutheran Theological Seminary. With the assistance of the Gloria Dei Aid Association for Lutherans (AAL) branch, they raised \$2,500 for the seminary.

This year, the relay was held on Oct. 5. The group consisted of 27 individuals from the Gloria Dei congregation who took turns walking segments ranging in length from one to four miles. At least two people walked together for all 26 miles. The time for the full 26.2-mile marathon was nine hours, eight minutes.

### **Good Shepherd marks anniversary**

### **New members** also welcomed into Texas congregation

On Reformation Sunday, Oct. 27, members of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Pleasanton, Texas, celebrated their 15th anniversary. The congregation also welcomed new members: Omar and Cave Beth Vasquez and Laura Zapata with her son, Jose (Joey).



New members are welcomed at Good Shepherd's 15th anniversary luncheon. From left to right: Pastor Jim Vineyard, Jose (Joey) Zapata, Laura Zapata, Omar Vasquez, Caye Beth Vasquez, congregation chairman Frank Wendrock.

In October 1987, a group of people, concerned with the direction of the new merged ELCA decided to join together and begin separate worship services. In 1990, they purchased a four-acre property with a metal building and began the process of building a church community. Three pastors — Don Voorhees, Michael Peterson and James Vineyard — have served the church. This year the congregation voted to go off of Home Missions status.

### 2003 Lutheran Ambassador schedule

Below is the 2003 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 certain issue or an interest in writing, please contact the editors.

### Date of issueEditor's Deadline Issue theme

January	December 9	Evangelism
February	January 13	Ambassador's 40th
March	February 10	War and Peace
April	March 10	Lent/Easter
May	April 7	AFLC Schools
June	May 12	State of the Clergy
July	June 9	Family (Youth)
August	July 7	Conference Review
September	August 11	<b>Christian Education</b>
October	September 8	Missions

November October 13 Reformation/Thanksgiving December November 10 Advent/Christmas



### A gentle invasion

No one attempts to

capture hearts and

change nations by

sending an infant —

no one but God.

he United States is considering an invasion of Iraq. If it happens it will most certainly not resemble an earlier invasion that took place in the Middle East. That invasion, which happened a little more than 2,000 years ago, didn't involve thousands of troops and sophisticated weaponry. It wasn't described to the world by any international media. Some in leadership heard about it and felt threatened by it, but many people at the time didn't even know it happened.

In some ways the invasion of long ago had a similar goal to the proposed invasion of Iraq. Regime change was sought after. New leadership was needed. But it wasn't about leadership of nations as much as leadership of individual lives. The means of bringing that about was not with large numbers of soldiers and a

massive amount of firepower. The "invading force" was an infant, a newborn baby that took up residence with a rather ordinary family.

What an unusual form of invasion God used. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given" (Isaiah 9:6, NIV). What could be less threatening and a greater contrast to a massive military than a baby? No one attempts to capture hearts and change

nations by sending an infant — no one but God.

He did not come as an intimidating presence. "He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope" (Matthew 12:19-21). Most invading forces crush whatever is in their way. Jesus did not break even the "bruised reed." He handles with great care and tenderness the life that is beaten and battered. He describes Himself as "gentle and humble in heart", the One to whom we can go to find rest for our souls (Matthew

He came to capture hearts, to bring about a change in who was leading our lives, not by forcing us into submission, but by becoming a servant. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and

became obedient to death — even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8).

He invaded in order to die. He came so that He might give His life, so that He might pay the penalty for our sins by His death on the cross.

A gentle invasion — it sounds like an oxymoron. The two words don't seem to fit together. But it is precisely what Jesus did, and He calls us to invade our world in a similar manner.

Governments, at times, in carrying out their responsibility to defend their citizens must invade with force. We, however, as followers of Jesus, invade the world around us with meekness and gentleness. "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near" (Philippians 4:5). Paul appealed to the Corinthians and sought to influence them "by the meekness and

> gentleness of Christ." He then reminds them, "For though we war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (II Corinthians 10:1, 3, 4). Instead of seeking to gain power and living ed are the meek, for they will

> > God's method of capturing

live in the world, we do not wage in fear of force, we operate with confidence in the promise, "Blessinherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

hearts and changing nations remains the same. He works through gentle, meek servants. He puts His Spirit into those who turn from sin and trust in Christ. He calls us to live out the Word. And then as the divine and the human come together, as God works in us and through us, great things happen.

An invasion force that consists of a baby — who would even consider operating in such a manner? Yet that is what God did, and for His surprising method of invading this world we give thanks. "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Galatians 4:4, 5).

He was born of a woman so that we might be born again. He was born under law so that we might be set free. He became a child so that we can become children of God. He came with gentleness so that we can come before the holy God with confidence.

May you have a blessed Christmas as you celebrate His gentle invasion.

Pastor Craig Johnson

### THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

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### SOMETHING TO SHARE

have an exciting, no-two-daysare-the-same job. I am the media relations specialist for a regional medical center. Having the busiest emergency department in the state, each day more than 35 ambulances bring patients to our hospital. My job is to handle any news reporters who inquire about these patients.

Because I am the buffer between our patients and reporters, I encounter people at their most vulnerable times. Last week, I was with two families who had each lost a teenager in separate tragic accidents. In the past, I've been with families dealing with suicide attempts and horrific incidences of rape. Media calls have led me to the bedside of convicts and murderers. I've known that children in my own community are dead before their parents do. It's an emotionally exhausting job, but somehow I'm called to it. I know that God has a place for me in the midst of it. I've had opportunities to pray with families, to cry with them and embrace them in their pain. Most of the time I feel inadequate and humbled when dealing with this kind of sorrow, but it keeps me focused on what really

Imagine going to work in a place where each day someone dies. It's sobering. But that's exactly what is happening all around each of us. It

### **Staying focused**

may not be at your job, but just pay attention to the news — each day someone dies. A quick glance through my local newspaper and today I find 24 obituaries. Each day someone goes on to face eternity.

With this constant reminder of death, why don't I live with the urgency of spreading the gospel in mind? Instead, I busy myself with

With this constant reminder of death, why don't I live with the urgency of spreading the gospel in mind?

things that are insignificant in comparison — school events, committee meetings, entertainment, and the list goes on. I believe that Satan is the god of distraction.

Even at church, it's so easy to get distracted from my original commission to spread the gospel ... instead I get caught up in the issue of the day. Should we change the time of church? Is so-and-so Lutheran enough? What color should the car-

pet be? Throughout my 40-plus years of church attendance, these and other what-seem-to-be-big-at-the-time issues have sapped my energy, caused hurt feelings and distracted me from seeing the lost. I'm ashamed of getting caught up in any of it.

Even good things — tree decorating, buying gifts, Christmas baking and the extreme busyness of the holidays — can distract me from seeing the lost around me, those who are suffering and in need of Jesus' saving grace.

Hebrews 12: 1-2 states, "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."

My friend has a t-shirt with a quote from a recent popular movie that says, "I see dead people." He uses it as a reminder that each person he sees is lost, spiritually dead and going to hell unless that person knows Jesus as his or her redeemer. It gives him courage to share his faith and stay focused on what is important. Those are my goals, too. I need to look for the opportunities to share with others because there are dead people all around me.

— Cheri (Carter) Russum Elim Lutheran Lake Stevens, Wash.