

# Forward in Christ

A LUTHERAN VOICE



## Christmas traditions

The gospels share what we need to know about Jesus' birth, but various Christmas traditions have developed through the years. *Page 26*

# JOY JOY JOY

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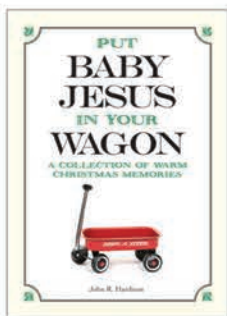


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*May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our ancestors;  
may he never leave us nor forsake us.* — 1 KINGS 8:57

## WHAT'S INSIDE

Have you ever wondered why Christmas is celebrated on Dec. 25? Or how many wise men really did visit the baby Jesus? You probably have heard stories that try to answer these and other questions about Christmas. Executive editor John Braun looks at some of those stories but also reminds us of the only place we can go to find sure answers—the Bible (p. 26).

Stories and legends also abound about Jesus' mother, the virgin Mary. God's Word does not share much about the mother of the Savior. She only speaks four times in the entire Bible. Missionary Mike Hartman explores those instances on p. 10. He also encourages us to talk more about Mary because it is a great way to get people to open their Bibles to see what it really says about her and about her Son. A new WELS outreach movie, *My Son, My Savior*, also can help you start that discussion as it looks at our Savior through the eyes of his mother, Mary. Learn more at [wels.net/mysonmysavior](http://wels.net/mysonmysavior).

Sharing Jesus' story of how he came to save us—from his miraculous birth through his perfect life to his death and resurrection—is our mission in life. On our back page article, retired pastor Joel Gerlach gives us a unique example to remind us of this purpose.

Julie Wietzke



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Great stories of the Bible

*Lorna Ehlke  
Summerfield, Florida*

# Through my Bible in 3 years

**DECEMBER 2015**

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|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1. John 17:1-5     | 12. Is. 2, 3, 4     | 23. Is. 22:15–23:18 |
| 2. Jn. 17:6-19     | 13. Is. 5           | 24. Is. 24, 25      |
| 3. Jn. 17:20-26    | 14. Is. 6           | 25. Is. 26, 27      |
| 4. Jn. 18:1-27     | 15. Is. 7:1–8:15    | 26. Is. 28          |
| 5. Jn. 18:28–19:16 | 16. Is. 8:16–10:4   | 27. Is. 29:1–30:17  |
| 6. Jn. 19:17-37    | 17. Is. 10:5-34     | 28. Is. 30:18–32:20 |
| 7. Jn. 19:38–20:10 | 18. Is. 11, 12      | 29. Is. 33, 34, 35  |
| 8. Jn. 20:11-31    | 19. Is. 13:1–14:23  | 30. Is. 36, 37      |
| 9. Jn. 21:1-14     | 20. Is. 14:24–16:14 | 31. Is. 38, 39      |
| 10. Jn. 21:15-25   | 21. Is. 17, 18, 19  |                     |
| 11. Isaiah 1       | 22. Is. 20:1–22:14  |                     |



# Believe the Christmas miracles

**“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. Matthew 1:20,21,24**

Michael A. Woldt

Can you imagine the reaction as people from Nazareth listened to Joseph tell his story? No, he wasn't going to divorce Mary. Yes, he remained committed to her. She hadn't been unfaithful after all! Her pregnancy was a miracle! The child in her womb had been conceived by the Holy Spirit! An angel told him!

## BELIEVING IN THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Were there looks of pity in the eyes of Joseph's friends as they walked away? Did they shake their heads in disbelief? Did they think to themselves, “Joseph might be a good carpenter, but how can he be such a fool? Everyone knows how a woman gets pregnant. Mary must have cheated on him.”

Despite what others may have thought, Joseph believed. He believed, not because he was delusional or a romantic fool. Joseph believed, not because the angel's message made logical sense. Joseph believed because the same Holy Spirit who caused Mary to conceive had created faith in his heart.

People today still shake their heads in disbelief at Christians who confess that a virgin gave birth to a son in Bethlehem on that first Christmas night. The proud human mind sits in judgment over God's message and declares, “It just doesn't make sense. You'd have to be a fool to believe that ancient myth.”

Yet, contrary to all logic, we continue to proclaim each Christmas that a virgin gave birth. We believe, not because it makes sense. We believe because God has spoken to us through the pages of Holy Scripture. We believe because the Holy Spirit has worked the miracle of faith in our hearts too.



## BELIEVING IN OUR SAVIOR

We also believe the most astonishing part of the angel's message. The real mystery is not the virgin birth itself. The truly incredible revelation in the angel's message is found in the child himself, the son who was to be given the name Jesus.

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We acknowledge that  
the Christmas story is  
incredible, but we also  
know that it's true.

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Why should the holy God care about a world of sinful people who rebel against him? Why would Jesus, true God, humble himself and be born into a world that despises and rejects him? Why would Jesus willingly live

under the law knowing that his whole life on earth was leading to the agony of the cross? Would God really do all that to save people from sin? It just doesn't make sense. But it's true! Jesus did come to save people from sin! Jesus came to save you and me from sin. Our Christmas hope and joy is wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.

Let the rest of the world scoff at our celebration of Christmas. Let people shake their heads and call us fools. We acknowledge that the Christmas story is incredible, but we also know that it's true. We have God's word on it. A virgin did give birth to a son. His name is Jesus. Jesus is our Joy. Jesus is our Peace. Jesus is the One who came from the Father, full of grace and truth!

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*Contributing editor Michael Woldt is pastor at David's Star, Jackson, Wisconsin.*



Mark Schweden

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When the truth  
needs to be spoken,  
we need to speak it.

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## Speaking the truth . . . in love

Some would say that being “politically correct” is simply taking care that your words do not needlessly offend people whose political, social, or religious views differ from yours. Others, however, would say that insistence on political correctness threatens free speech and silences those who disagree with the “correct” views promoted by those who want to shape the culture.

The apostle James certainly knew that words can hurt and do damage. “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. . . . It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:6,8). Words can destroy trust. Words can be used to belittle a spouse. Words can destroy friendships. Words can dishonor parents. Words can distort the truth and lead people to believe a lie. Words can give life and energy to vile and wicked ideas. Words can entice and tempt others to sin.

You might think that since words have so much potential to do harm, the less said the better. But words can also accomplish amazing good. With words we express our love to one another. With words we teach our children values and morals. With words we comfort those who are sad and share in the joy of those who are celebrating. With words we pray and sing praises to God. With words we admonish brothers and sisters who are caught up in sinful behavior. Most of all, it is with words that we can share with others the beautiful truths that God has revealed to us in the Scriptures.

Yes, God wants us to speak. But he is also very clear *how* he wants us to speak. Paul encouraged the Ephesians to speak the truth. And he went further, saying that we are to speak the truth *in love*.

There are times when speaking the truth in love is not easy—when frightened silence seems to be the path of

least resistance. What do you say when your coworker makes it clear that living with his girlfriend outside of marriage is perfectly normal? How will you warn your friend when you know that he regularly views pornography on his computer? What words do you use when your college roommate argues that every woman should have the right to have an abortion? Should you speak up when your neighbor accuses people who are not in favor of same-sex marriage of being closed-minded, bigoted, and homophobic?

When God gives us the opportunity to express our beliefs—and he will—we need to be ready. We need to be ready to speak the truth. But we also need to be ready to speak the truth not with words that mock or belittle or boast. Rather we need to speak the truth *in love*—out of love for the truth and with a loving attitude toward the person who hears us.

Even when we speak the truth in love people will not always respond well. Sometimes the truth—even when spoken in love—is not what people want to hear. We will often be condemned for our efforts. We will be accused of being judgmental. We may lose friends and suffer ridicule in return. When we speak as a synod, other church bodies will accuse us of being legalistic, clinging to old-fashioned and outmoded beliefs, or just plain wrong.

But that should not deter us. When the truth needs to be spoken, we need to speak it. And we need to speak it without fear, without apology, and always in love.

# Light for our path

**Is there a simple answer why many mainline Christian denominations either remain silent or now actually officially teach morality contrary to Scripture?**

James F. Pope

While there are certainly other contributing factors to the situation you describe, a simple answer can be found in a church's approach to biblical interpretation.

## DIFFERENT METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

The most common method of biblical interpretation for churches under the umbrella of Christianity is the historical-critical approach. This approach has two underlying premises: Any account in the Bible that contains supernatural content is fiction and not fact, and God did not inspire the writers of biblical books by giving them the exact words to write down.

Those who subscribe to this approach maintain that miracles recorded in the Bible are merely the reports of superstitious people with scant scientific information. They further assert that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not write the gospels that bear their names, but individuals who never knew Jesus personally and who lived decades after his earthly ministry penned the gospels.

The historical-grammatical method, on the other hand, takes a drastically different approach toward the Bible. It treats Scripture on its own terms: that all of it is truth (John 17:17), inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16), and centers on Jesus Christ (John 5:39). The historical-grammatical method examines the words of Scripture in their historical context and seeks to understand and apply those words as they were originally intended—regardless of how unpopular the content might be today.

## PUTTING THE METHODS INTO PRACTICE

With this very brief background of biblical interpretation methods in mind, consider what I could do if I interpreted the Bible according to the historical-critical method. If I came across a Bible passage

with moral content I did not like—whatever it happened to be—I could amend it in ways that appeared to be credible and legitimate for me today. I could ask, “Would it be loving to others to accept as truth and to implement in life what this passage is saying? Or would it be more loving to find a different meaning and application?” To some people, that could appear to be a sound and noble approach to biblical interpretation.

But you see what is happening, don't you? People are approaching the Bible with their minds made up regarding what Scripture should and should not say. And if Scripture does not agree with their opinions, then they believe they can—with self-asserted scholarship and stated sincerity—propose a meaning that lines up with their ideas.

Is that how biblical interpretation is to work? Isn't it to be just the opposite? King David implored of the Lord: “Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me” (Psalm 25:4,5). Proper biblical interpretation approaches God's Word with a student-like attitude, seeking to be taught by God and to have him replace our ideas on subject matters—including morality—with his.

When that happens and we profess what the Bible says, we may find ourselves standing up for a message that is unpopular for some. Does that mean we change the message to make our lives easier or to attract people who have itching ear syndrome (2 Timothy 4:3)? Not at all. We hold to the Lord's teachings (John 8:31) out of love for him and others.

*Contributing editor James Pope, professor at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, is a member at St. John, New Ulm.*

James Pope also answers questions online at [wels.net/questions](http://wels.net/questions). Submit your questions there or to [fic@wels.net](mailto:fic@wels.net).

*Your word*  
is a lamp  
for my feet,  
a light on  
my path.

Psalm 119:105



# Talking about Mary

Mary is such a wonderful example of faith.

Yet so many add stories and legends not found in the Bible.

Michael Hartman

Karla regularly attends a Lutheran church in León, Mexico, but like many Latinos, her past holds strong ties to Mary.

“I remember how much I enjoyed dancing in the parades,” she says, recalling a December festival to the virgin Mary she used to participate in.

“Every February, my father walks 80 miles to ask for the virgin’s blessing,” she continues. “In my hometown, each day in May a different professional group parades to the virgin statue located in the church on the central plaza. May 3 was the day I was required to participate. Many carry heavy statues of saints on their backs as they join the parade to the church. When I was in college, we actually received course credit for participation in the ritual. We believed the virgin has the power to protect us.”

Karla’s experiences are shared by many Latinos who come to the Lutheran church as adults. On a recent Sunday at Resurrected Christ Lutheran Church in León, Mexico, Bible study was especially crowded. The subject of the conversation for the day was talking to others about Mary. During the study, the question was asked, “How did you come to believe what you now know about Mary?”

“I read the Bible,” those in attendance answered.

**We are not surprised to hear someone learned the truth about Mary by reading the Bible.**

But it demonstrates a point. People who have misperceptions of Mary are rarely familiar with what the Bible does—and does not—tell us about her. Countless myths exist about Mary: that she was able to walk at six months; that she was fed by an angel; that she became engaged to Joseph after his staff blossomed and a dove landed on his head; that she appeared to an Aztec peasant named Juan Diego.

In my experience, talking about Mary is often an opportunity to get people to open their Bibles. Many are surprised that Mary only speaks four times in the Bible. When someone brings up the subject of Mary, consider this response: “There are so many different ideas about Mary, why don’t we let Mary talk for herself?”

You can read everything Mary ever said in the Bible in less than 15 minutes. After reading each part of the Bible, ask these questions: What surprised you? What do we learn from Mary’s words? What was important to Mary?

**Mary’s conversation with the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26-38)**

As you read what Mary said when an angel appeared

to her, you cannot help but admire the words of a faithful believer. Like Abraham and other heroes of faith, Mary simply trusts God's message even though she does not fully comprehend it. Her prayer of willing service and submission to God's will is a model for all believers.

In addition to her example of faith, we see her humanity. Many who read this section note how Mary did not have an inside track on what was going on. She, like all of us, needed God to reveal it to her when the time had fully come.

#### **Mary's song (Luke 1:46-55)**

One of Mary's most important statements jumps out at us at the beginning of her song. After hearing Elizabeth's blessing, Mary glorifies the Lord saying, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Mary needed a Savior. Like all of us, she had committed innumerable sins since her birth. Christ, her son, is her Savior too. The remainder of her song is really her carrying out her statement of rejoicing.

Mary's statement is prophetic when she says, "From now on all generations will call me blessed," but listen to what she says and we see why she is blessed. Mary is not called blessed because of her personal qualities, but because of the wonderful things God has done to her. We see a believer celebrating God's greatness and mercy. Her focus is on God her Savior.

#### **Mary and preteen Jesus (Luke 2:41-52)**

Abraham treated his wife poorly. David murdered a faithful follower. Peter betrayed. Paul persecuted. The Bible is full of examples of heroes of faith failing. I am certain Mary would not claim that the time they lost Jesus for three days was an example of great parenting.

You can hear the relief of a mother in Mary's words when she finally finds her son. You also see a person who seems to have forgotten her son's special mission. Jesus respectfully reminds her, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" In Mary, we see a loving but human mother.

#### **Mary at a wedding (John 2:1-11)**

Like the encounter in the temple, Jesus' response to Mary's words lends insight into what she's thinking. When the wine runs out, Mary finds Jesus and tells him. Jesus' respectful reply demonstrates that Mary was trying to do what she thought was best. Who of us has not at one time or another thought if only God would do this my way?

Mary pays attention to Jesus' every word. Jesus' response, "My hour has not yet come," did not

close the door completely. With the final words of Mary recorded in Scripture, she encourages the servants to do what Jesus tells them.

In this final section, we again see a human Mary. However, we also see a Mary who follows her Savior, paying close attention to his words.

#### **These are the only times Mary talks in the Bible.**

She does appear in plenty of other stories. In addition to Christmas and Epiphany, she was present for Jesus' death and listed among the believers after his ascension. But no other words of hers are recorded for us. After reading through Mary's words together, I encourage the person to look up the other places in the Bible where she appears.

When the subject of Mary comes up, remember, it is not a matter of winning a debate. The goal is to open the Bible. Let the power of the Holy Spirit work as Scripture is read and studied.

When Karla spoke of her experience of coming to know the biblical Mary, she stressed the importance of patience. Latinos, especially, have a strong cultural connection to Mary. She's the ideal mother figure. Family festivals and bonds play a stronger role than they do in most Anglo families. As an outsider, one of the most attractive parts of the Latino culture is the priority it places on relationships.

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### Talking about Mary is often an opportunity to get people to open their Bibles.

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Coming to a biblical understanding of Mary's role often has a significant impact on personal ties.

"Family events were especially hard when I stopped following Mary," Karla recalls. "Parties and family gatherings are intertwined closely with holidays that incorrectly celebrate Mary. But I am so glad I came to believe what the Bible teaches about Mary. When I used to follow Mary, I didn't understand what Jesus did for me. What he did for the world."

Karla now carefully teaches her children about the Mary in the Bible. Like Mary, Karla wants to point people to her Savior Jesus.

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*Missionary Michael Hartman, field coordinator for Latin America, lives in León, Mexico.*

The goal is to open the Bible



# ORIGINS:

## TWO MODELS

**When comparing the two models, we need to understand the fundamental assumptions of both.**

Arthur A. Eggert

We see them everywhere—on television, on the Internet, and in magazines. They are scientific claims that the earth has evolved and that numerous events happened many millions of years in the past. The claims sound so official. With the incredible advances of technology, it seems almost foolish not to believe them. Yet we need to understand both the biblical and the scientific approach to truth before we are taken in by them.

### THE BIBLICAL APPROACH TO TRUTH

The fundamental assumption of historic Christianity—including WELS—is that the Bible is the inerrant, verbally inspired Word of God. Christians believe this assumption is true because when they study the Bible, the Holy Spirit convinces them that it is true. The Bible describes a supernatural being called “the LORD” and states that he created and manages the universe. The Bible is studied through a set of principles called “hermeneutics,” which permits doctrines to be properly formulated.

All the teachings of Christianity about God and salvation are based on its fundamental assumption and hermeneuti-

cal study. If the Bible is indeed inerrant, then we can have full confidence in the absolute truth of these teachings.

But what if this fundamental assumption of Christianity is false, and the Bible perhaps only contains the Word of God? Then we can never be sure about any of the teachings of the Bible. For example, was Jesus true God? Did he atone for our sins? Did God create the world? If the fundamental assumption is false, then no matter how good the hermeneutical study, everything will be mere speculation, the teachings of men and not of God. Christian churches that abandon the assumption that the Bible is inerrant eventually deny almost every biblical teaching. The human heart cannot, on its own, discern the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14). St. Paul wrote about the futility of false faith: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17).

### THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO TRUTH

The physical and biological sciences are different from Christianity in that they cannot determine absolute truth because the universe is too big to study completely. Scientists can only create models—also called theories or laws—that explain events that have been observed in nature (for example, an apple falling from a tree). To develop such models/theories, scientists use what is called the “scientific method.” When they observe an event, they weigh, count, and measure whatever appears to be related to the event.

After gathering data from several events (e.g., observing other objects fall), they develop a theory to explain the data. They use this model/theory, such as the law of gravitation, to predict what will happen in yet untested cases. When they observe such cases, they refine their theory if the observed results are different from what it predicts.

This cycle is repeated until they conclude their model/theory/law is good enough for its intended use. A good model is the scientific equivalent of “truth,” but it is always subject to change based on new observations.

The physical and biological sciences are like Christianity in that they are based on a fundamental assumption, namely, that all observed events can be explained in terms of the inherent properties of matter, energy, time, and space. This assumption means that there can be no supernatural interference with the workings of the universe. Consequently, no actively involved god can exist. Furthermore, without an outside agent like the Lord to have created it, the universe must have evolved by itself. There is no other logical alternative. Macroscopic evolution, therefore, is a forced conclusion that follows from the fundamental assumption of science, not an outcome of the application of the scientific method. Scientists cannot prove evolution because they have assumed it!

But what if an active god exists? Then the fundamental assumption of science is false because of the existence of such a god. Therefore, when scientists see an apple fall, they cannot know if it fell as a result of the natural properties of matter or whether a god knocked it off the tree. In fact, every observed event might be a result of natural forces, of a special supernatural act, or of a combination of both. For example, if someone rolled dice, would the numbers rolled be the result of random processes of nature, which can be statistically modeled, or the result of divine intervention, which cannot be modeled? No matter how faithfully the scientific method is applied and no matter how cleverly the theories—such as those of evolution—are developed, they have no validity because they are based on a false assumption.

Scientists make their fundamental assumption because their work is meaningless without it. Even Christians who are scientists use it as a general guide in their research, although they do not believe it is absolutely true.

### **EACH IS BASED SOLELY ON FAITH**

The conflict is clear. Both the fundamental assumptions of Christianity and of science cannot be true because they

lead to opposite conclusions about the existence of a god and the origin of the universe. One or both must be false. The important thing for Christians is that neither of these assumptions is independently provable; each is based solely on faith.

Some will object, claiming that the overwhelming evidence gathered in numerous fields of science forces one to accept the fundamental assumption of science rather than that of Christianity. In reality, however, this evidence is equally well-explained because the Lord is almighty. The reason scientific models/theories often appear to work is that the Lord is a God of order (1 Corinthians 14:33). He usually controls the universe in such a manner that we can use our intellect to make reasonable decisions. We

call God’s usual management of the universe the “laws of nature.” Yet the Lord exercises direct supervisory control over everything, tweaking natural processes so that things work out as he desires, without scientists ever being aware of this (i.e., things happen “under their radar”). This can involve the outcome of rolling dice (Proverbs 16:33), the lives of sparrows (Matthew 10:29) or the positioning of the stars (Isaiah 40:26).

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## God is not bound by natural processes nor obligated to leave behind evidence of how he acted.

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The Lord can also act supernaturally through spectacular miracles, such as those recorded in the Bible (creating the universe, sending a huge flood, or causing the sun to stand still). When he acts outside the laws of nature, scientists will completely misrepresent the cause of their observations because their models/theories assume that only natural processes occurred. God is not bound by natural processes nor obligated to leave behind evidence of how he acted. The psalmist wrote, “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him” (Psalm 115:3).

To stay close to the Scriptures and avoid the evolutionary trap, we must realize that it is only by faith that we accept the Bible and its teachings as the inerrant Word of God. The writer to the Hebrews wrote, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (11:3).

Simply stated, we believe the Lord made the world in six days because the Bible says so and for no other reason.

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*Dr. Arthur Eggert is a member at Peace, Sun Prairie, Wisconsin.*

This is the first article in a two-part series on creation.

## An atheist who disregarded the Bible discovers the saving message of the Scriptures.

Amanda Klemp

Brian Ralston went in ready for a fight he was confident he'd win. But when he started posing his surefire talking points, the pastor always had a Scripture-based response.

"I thought the perfect argument was 'you have to believe every single word in that book is true, because if you don't believe every single word is true, then you can't tell me who is smart enough to say what is right or wrong,'" says Ralston, remembering his skepticism before that first meeting. "I thought I'd just cross my arms and wait for him to question his whole philosophy on life."

But that was before he really heard and studied the Word of God at St. Paul, Muskego, Wis.

### ZERO INTEREST IN CHURCH

Ralston grew up with a father who is a confirmed atheist and a mother who took her husband's lead regarding religion, or lack thereof, in the home. God and church were not part of Ralston's life.

Ralston says, "My dad is to this date a confirmed atheist. He has zero inter-

est and thinks anything church-related is about the want of your money rather than concern about your salvation." Ralston followed in his father's footsteps in these beliefs.

When he was younger, Ralston pursued an education in science and was convinced his understanding of the natural world through evolution trumped everything the Bible says about our world and lives.

He was in his twenties when he met Jennifer, his wife of ten years. Jennifer wasn't raised going to church either, and religion was not part of their life together. After the wedding came two children, a son, Jacob, now 8, and a daughter, Madelyn, 7.

### A DIFFERENT LOOK AT SCRIPTURE

It wasn't until Ralston started to think about school for his small children that he even stepped foot into St. Paul a little over five years ago. A friend suggested to Ralston that St. Paul's School was the best in the area and he should look at it for his own children entering preschool. That interest in his children's academic education eventually led to his own spiritual education.

Ralston and his wife ultimately decided they wanted to send their children to St. Paul's School. They also knew that if they joined the church,

they'd get a break on tuition. In what, he admits, was initially a purely financial decision, they set up their first meeting with the pastor at St. Paul.

At the time Ralston considered himself an atheist, and he thought he was going to turn this pastor's world upside down with his arguments.

Ralston says, "In my pre-Christian days I would use what were man-made mistakes to disregard the Bible because people couldn't agree.

"That's what I used to reinforce my own thinking," he explains. "They can't even agree what's in [the Bible]; how am I supposed to live my life following the principles they can't even come to consensus on as Christians and people who have studied the Bible their entire life?

"I used that as a lot of justification for disregarding [the Bible], and it took the cycle of events and the providence of God that brought me here before I understood that I was collateral damage of all those people who didn't understand and that I blamed the Word of God, not the people who are misunderstanding it," says Ralston. "Then my eyes were opened to sit down and look at it more in depth."

Ralston has since studied the Scriptures and has a goal to read the entire Bible. He finds himself particularly

# Confessions OF FAITH



drawn to Jesus' parables. "The relevance of Scripture today, despite its age, reinforces that it is timeless," he says. "A lot of people think it's antiquated and old fashioned. It's more current every day than it was the day before, in my opinion."

Ralston doesn't report a "life-changing" moment, trauma, or tragedy in his life that prompted him to look at Scripture. He's a typical law-abiding family man who grew up in a typical home. But now he knows that he's a saved child of God. He has something more than he had before. He knows it happened because the Holy Spirit worked in his heart through the message of the Scriptures. God's providence brought him and the Bible together. When he began to look through the Scriptures, things changed.

From the first one-hour meeting with the pastor to the required membership class, all the time the Holy Spirit was working in Ralston's heart. After completing the membership class, he had his children baptized. But he and Jennifer did not get baptized right away because he wanted to be sure he approached his baptism with the appropriate reverence. Eventually, in a conversation with his wife, Ralston said if his birthday landed on a Sunday that particular year, he would get

baptized. It did, so he and his wife were both baptized on his birthday a few years ago.

### A NEW INTEREST IN OUTREACH

Ralston says he doesn't necessarily feel like his life as a husband, father, and employee changed outwardly, but "it has changed the way I view my place in the world more so than it has changed how I view myself." He explains that he's noticed a bigger capacity for forgiveness, patience, and recognizing the plank in his own eye before pointing out the speck in someone else's. He tries to take on a "what would Jesus do" attitude in all he does.

"Once I realized the expectations that as a Christian you should try to be Christlike—you should want to live your life in a way that reflects Christ—I knew there's no way I can live that. But that's why I need Jesus," says Ralston. Forgiven by Jesus, he can forgive. Loved by Jesus, he can love selflessly. He's motivated by Christ to be Christlike.

Since Ralston and his family joined St. Paul, they have shared the saving message with his wife's parents, who have also joined the church. His parents have not reached that point yet, but he says that he, along with his wife and children, continue to share the good news with them. He prays



Brian Ralston and his two children, Jacob and Madelyn.

that one day his parents might know their Savior as well.

He says, "I literally thank God every day for St. Paul's and the understanding and trueness of what they teach—it aligns perfectly with Scripture."

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*Amanda Klemp, WELS web content manager, is a member at Living Word, Waukesha, Wisconsin.*



**heart to heart**  
parent conversations

**Spoiler alert:** This month's authors all agree that if we want our children to be content, we parents need to model contentment for them. Groan. That's hard for flawed parents—at least for me. Thankfully, as Ann Jahns notes, we have a heavenly Father who forgives us, thanks to his Son's sacrifice. So, why read this month's articles? Because although we may not find a silver bullet for contentment in these articles, we will find an all-powerful God who promises to be with us and help us each day.



**Join the conversation!**

Visit [wels.net/forwardinchrist](http://wels.net/forwardinchrist) and look for the *Heart to heart* link. Read uncut versions of the articles, learn more about the authors, and give us your thoughts and reactions.

## HOW CAN WE NURTURE CONTENTMENT IN OUR CHILDREN'S HEARTS?

**Contentment cannot** be taught. If it were that simple and easy, we'd all have it all the time. Someone would just teach us the logic of it, and it would stick.

"Don't you see?" we'd tell our kids. "Contentment makes the same sort of sense as  $1+1=2$ ." And then they'd nod their heads in agreement, won over by our irrefutable logic.

I'm pretty sure that's not effective. Why? Because I know me. And I know my daughter. And if the Scriptures are true, I know you and your kids too.

If I'm going to tamp down the whirring, yearning, and chasing of my discontentment this Christmas, if I'm going to help my daughter do the same, there is only one force with both the consistency and the power to deliver. His name? The Holy Spirit. He alone will allow me to walk past the Apple store without a second thought. He alone will allow my three-year-old daughter to walk past racks of Christmas toys without throwing a tantrum. That's just honest.

Keeping that in mind, here are a few quick thoughts on unleashing the Spirit:

**One of the most** remarkable things about my husband and his family is their overwhelming sense of contentment in the Lord. Their attitudes have been such a blessing and example to me.

My husband and his siblings were raised in an openly Christian family in communist East Germany. They had few material possessions and opportunities. How could people raised in such an environment become such content adults? His parents fostered this contentment.

Although my children are in a country overflowing with opportunities and lavish excesses, the example of my in-laws still applies as I seek to encourage contentment in my children.

**My attitude.** Contentment is born of thankfulness. Believers know that everything is a gift from our heavenly Father. I can look to God's Word regularly. I will begin to know

**In preparing to** write about contentment, I issued myself a challenge. How long could I go without expressing my discontentment in any way? Well, I think I made it about ten minutes. Sadly, it's not in our sinful nature to be content. Every day on this earth is a battle as we examine our possessions, home, looks, and situations, and find them lacking in some way. There will always be someone out there who is healthier, richer, prettier, and more successful than we are. How can we cultivate a heart of contentment in our children—and ourselves—in that environment?

The Bible gives some marvelous examples of godly contentment. Take the apostle Paul, for one. The self-proclaimed "worst of sinners" endured some things in God's name that would send most of us packing. He lived through shipwrecks, floggings, hunger, a snake bite, and prison. Throughout all those situations, he "learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (Philippians 4:11). He even gently reminded Timothy, "If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Timothy 6:8).

♦ **Unleash the Spirit on yourself.** In the Word, you'll find this incredible, mind-blowing God who has met every one of your most basic and most profound needs in totally overwhelming ways. Did I gush enough to make my point? The reality is that if we parents are not convinced we have everything we could possibly want or need in Christ, how could we possibly hope to share that same news with our kids? My daughter can smell a rat a mile away.

♦ **Unleash the Spirit on your child(ren).** See above. Just think, it's December! What better picture is there than that mangy manger for teaching the love and promises of God?

♦ **Live gratitude.** Even shout it! I do, and I heartily recommend it. When I see another stunning Carolina crescent moon, my whole house knows about it—and who put it there! Sometimes at dinner, I'll very intentionally ask my girls, "What are you thankful for today?" We do that at bedtime too. At the tender age of three, my daughter sometimes has a hard time getting past the zoo, but—hey—I don't mind asking her, "Are you thankful for Jesus too? Why?"

♦ **Ignore, squash, or redirect discontentment.** Pray for wisdom on which of those triggers to pull in which circumstance and then pull it. Don't be afraid to let the Spirit convict through you. Whatever you do, don't *ever* indulge it. The human heart is a bottomless pit. One more thing will not satisfy. Only Jesus does.

♦ **Finally, build these rhythms into your family life intentionally, practically, and concretely all the time.** The human heart doesn't magically heal from discontent after December 25 rolls by. Before we know it, 2016 will drop in on us, and once again in the new year we will find our hearts in need of Holy Spirit-provided contentment. I am also delighted, however, to tell you that once again in the new year you'll reliably find the Spirit for yourself and your children in the words and promises of God.

*Jonathan Bourman is a pastor at Peace, Aiken, S.C. He and his wife, Melanie, have a three-year-old daughter.*



the character of God. This amazing God is on my side. My responses to difficult situations or material wants can be filled with God's peace. I can turn all of my life's challenges over to him and obediently await his leading.

**My words.** I can intentionally talk about gifts—spiritual and material—from God. I can take time to thank God aloud. I can lead my family as we thank God for one another and the special qualities that each family member has. I can memorize Bible verses, knowing God's words will truly change my heart. I must talk often about the greatest gift ever given—that of the Savior.

**My time.** I can enjoy Advent and Christmas worship with my children. Though it can be a challenge with small kids, I can enjoy extra opportunities for praise and worship.

I can take time to enjoy family devotions. Our family especially loves to sing "Away in the Manger" together before bed.

I can focus on the *people* parts of Christmas—get-togethers,

games, baking—rather than the present parts. We spend some time preparing gifts for others, but I try to keep it at a minimum because I want this to be a small part of our celebration.

I can serve. There are so many ways that I enjoy serving, and my kids can sometimes serve as well.

**My actions.** I avoid having my kids make Christmas lists. I usually recycle toy catalogs before the kids see them. This keeps our "gimmies" down.

We don't buy, buy, buy. This isn't easy and sometimes I fail, but I want them to see that we are good stewards of our money.

So much of parenting is modeling. We can use our words, but in the end it is what our children see that makes the difference.

*Wendy Heyn and her husband, Juerg, have three children.*



Does my family have food? Yes. And we often waste it. Does my family have clothing? You bet. So much that we often puzzle over our options of what to wear.

So, at this time of year in particular, how do we as Christian parents teach our children to be content "whatever the circumstances"? It might sound simplistic, but I believe it is critical for us to model godly contentment in our homes by what we say and do. There are many ways to do this, but here are a few ideas:

♦ **Guard our tongues.** I'm ashamed of how often I express discontentment in front of my boys. Our kids are listening and picking up on our attitudes—good and bad. How comforting that we can confess our failings and be reassured of God's forgiveness.

♦ **Seek out situations where we can help others and learn to value our blessings.** What an impact on a family to volunteer in a mission setting or help our kids donate their gently-used possessions to those who need them more than they do. These teaching moments will have a greater impact than just saying, "We are very blessed."

♦ **Set aside the first portion of our earnings or chore money to give sacrificially to our church out of gratitude for God's blessings.** We can model how to use our blessings to help advance the work of God's kingdom.

♦ **At the dinner table or in the car, ask, "What are you thankful for today?"** Big blessings or small, they are all a gift from our loving Father, bestowed upon his undeserving children. How humbling.

As a parent, I constantly have to remind myself that by being discontent with what God has given me, I am in effect saying, "God, you don't know what you're doing." I pray for the strength to model contentment for my boys. Although God doesn't always give us what we *want*, in his perfect wisdom, he gives us exactly what we *need*.

*Ann Jahns and her husband, Thad, have three sons, two in college and one in high school.*



# teentalk

## My life as a child of divorce

Divorce affects entire families. How can we support and encourage those struggling with the long-lasting effects?

I am a product of divorce. As a child, it defined me. My parents were divorced—so, of course, I must be a troubled child. At least that's how everyone made me feel.

**Already as a first grader, I remember being treated differently than other students.** So I acted naughty. Maybe I played into the assumptions.

As school continued, I never talked about my parents and their divorce. I would get embarrassed when we would talk about the Sixth Commandment in school—"You shall not commit adultery." "Divorce means adultery" would click in my head. I'd sit there and not say anything.

When I was in the sixth grade, my mom got married again. He seemed like a great guy. But later, we found out he was a struggling drug addict. I worried about my mom getting another divorce. I wondered if my mom would go to heaven. I look back and wonder why no one attempted to make it clear to me that I was okay, that my sister was okay, that my mom was okay. This man ultimately chose drug addiction over us, abandoning his marital duties. He deserted us. I avoided ever talking about my family.

When the Sixth Commandment came around in class again, I remember not wanting to go to school . . . but I went. No one clarified anything for me or comforted me. Maybe they didn't know I was struggling with such things, and maybe I should have asked. But what 12-year-old is going to raise her hand and say, "Is my mom's divorce okay?"

I went to a Lutheran high school. Not many people there had divorced or separated parents. I had a serious boyfriend for about two years, who ultimately broke up with me because my parents were divorced. He said he "just couldn't deal with it and felt like he could never marry me." Couldn't marry me? We were just kids in high school! But it showed me again how divorced persons are perceived. I got the feeling I was somehow extra sinful because my parents were divorced.

**Why is divorce looked at as worse than other sins?** One sort of sinner is not better than another. People who get divorced can be forgiven. Our focus shouldn't be on the stigma of certain sins, but on repentance and faith. Many people struggle with many challenges and sins. People who are judged for their circumstances can be turned off by such judgment.

I'm not saying to accept people in their sins. Absolutely not. But we need to show patience and understanding. Both law and gospel need to be applied. Struggling sinners are forgiven because Jesus died for them.

If you don't know the story behind someone's situation, don't make assumptions. Don't assume everyone who is divorced came to that position by pursuing sin. Don't assume you know someone's heart. Approach people with support, with loving words. That could be all they need to begin healing.

My point is not to complain about how challenging my childhood was or how everyone around me handled things wrongly. That is not the case. I am writing this to raise awareness of things that could be happening if we are open to helping one another. Life is hard; we are sinful people. What is most important—in fact, the only thing of ultimate importance—is what Christ did for us. We have a gracious God who forgives all sins. Let's seek to help and forgive each other, rather than making life more difficult for those who've been affected by hurtful sins.

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*Because of the personal nature of this article, the author's name has been withheld.*

## CHANGES IN MINISTRY

### Pastors

**Bergenthal, Guy R.**, to St. Peter, Elmwood, Wis.

**Fleischmann, David C.**, to Trinity, Kaukauna, Wis.

**Krause, Brad D.**, to Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Appleton, Wis.

**Langebartels, Matthew J.**, to Redeemer, Tucson, Ariz.

**Lewig, Daniel I.**, to St. John, Hillpoint, Wis.

**Lockman, Steven M.**, to Living Word, Petaluma/Christ, Windsor, Calif.

**Marquardt, Guy M.**, to India

**Mueller, Paul M.**, to Cross of Christ, Kingman, Ariz.

**Scharf, Nathanael R.**, to St. Paul, New Ulm, Minn.

**Schoeneck, Mark E.**, to Immanuel, Watertown/St. Mark, Watertown (Richwood), Wis.

**Schroeder, Allen K.**, to retirement

**Sutton, Nathan O.**, to Our Savior, San Antonio, Tex.

**Valleau, Dennis J.**, to Our Redeemer, Wabasha, Minn./Grace, Nelson, Wis.

**Zak, Benjamin P.**, to St. John, Milwaukee, Wis.

## NOTICE FOR CONGREGATION TREASURERS AND PASTORS

We thank God for you and for your support of the ministry WELS carries out on behalf of all congregations. We ask that you continue to mail your Congregation Mission Offering (CMO) deposit and its processing coupon to our bank lock box, which provides effective and efficient deposit processing for the synod. The last business day of each month is the reporting cutoff date for the CMO deposit. For the deposit to be included in reported receipts for the month, CMO must be received in the synod's bank lock box on or before the last business day. An exception is made for December offerings. Gifts received by the bank lock box up to and including Jan. 8, 2016, will be credited as 2015 CMO, if accompanied by a 2015 coupon. Thank you for your assistance.

## COMING EVENTS

**Living nativity**—Dec. 4–5, 6–8 P.M.

Christ, Eagle River, Wis. Presentations run every 20 minutes. 715-479-8307.

**Living nativity**—Dec. 4–5, 6–9 P.M.; Dec.

6, 4–7 P.M. St. Paul, Howards Grove, Wis. Presentations run every 20 minutes. Website, [www.stpaulshowardsgrove.org](http://www.stpaulshowardsgrove.org). 920-565-3780.

**Living nativity**—Dec. 4–5, 5–8 P.M. Trinity, Marinette, Wis. Presentations run every 20 minutes. Website, [www.trinitymarinette.com](http://www.trinitymarinette.com). 715-732-9868.

**Living nativity**—Dec. 5, 4–7 P.M. Martin Luther, Oshkosh, Wis. Live nativity presented in “drive-through” fashion. Website, [www.mloshkosh.org/live-nativity](http://www.mloshkosh.org/live-nativity).

**Live nativity**—Dec. 5. St. Matthew, Oconomowoc, Wis. Performances at 5 P.M., 5:45 P.M., and 6:30 P.M. Hosted by St. Matthew; Holy Trinity, Okauchee, Wis.; St. Mark, Ixonia, Wis.; St. John, Ixonia, Wis.; and St. Paul, Ixonia, Wis.

### WELS ministerial education school Christmas concerts—

- Dec. 5, 7:30 P.M.; Dec. 6, 4 P.M. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. 507-354-8221
- Dec. 13, 3 and 7 P.M. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. 262-242-8100
- Dec. 13, 3 P.M.; Dec. 17, 10 A.M. Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis. 920-261-4352
- Dec. 18, 7 P.M. Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich. 989-793-1041

**Mid-term graduation**—Dec. 17, 10 A.M. Chapel of the Christ, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. 507-354-8221

**“Men of His Word” conference**—Feb. 20, 2016. Best Western, Oshkosh, Wis. Theme: “Stand Firm.” Website, [www.menofhisword.org](http://www.menofhisword.org).

**Pathways to Christ retreat**—Mar. 11–13, 2016. Oshkosh, Wis. 920-233-1069. Website, [www.pathways.martinlutheroshkosh.com](http://www.pathways.martinlutheroshkosh.com)

**Christian Woman Today retreat**—Mar. 11–13, 2016. Sheraton, Brookfield, Wis. Theme: “Christ lives in me (Galatians 2:20b).” Maureen, 262-784-0412. Website, [www.christianwomantoday.org](http://www.christianwomantoday.org).

**53rd annual Lutheran Women's Missionary Society convention**—June 23–26, 2016. Pheasant Run Resort, St. Charles, Ill. Theme: “Christ Alone, Our Cornerstone.” Website, [www.lwms.org](http://www.lwms.org).

**WELS International Youth rally**—June 28–July 1, 2016. Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colo. Theme: “Our God Reigns.” [youthrally2016@wels.net](mailto:youthrally2016@wels.net). Website, [wels.net/events](http://wels.net/events).

**Women's Ministry Conference**—July 21–23, 2016. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. Theme: “Mentors.” Website, [wels.net/wmconference](http://wels.net/wmconference).

**Tour to Colorado**—July 22–Aug. 3, 2016. Join the Martin Luther College Alumni Association's 2016 tour to Col-

orado. Steve Balza, 507-217-1731. Website, <http://mlcalumni.wix.com/tours>.

## JOB OPPORTUNITIES

**Clinic administrator**—The Central Africa Medical Mission is accepting applications for a clinic administrator for the Lutheran Mobile Clinic (Malawi) for a three-year term of service beginning November 2016. The clinic administrator can be a nurse, but teachers, business backgrounds, or anyone with a strong desire to serve in a business position is encouraged to apply. Preferred applicants are single females, due to living arrangements. Contact [cammcontact@charter.net](mailto:cammcontact@charter.net) or call 262-677-3844 for information.

**Development director**—for Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School, New Ulm, Minn., starting Jan. 1, 2016. Contact Principal Tim Plath for a job description and application at 507-354-6851 or [tplath@mvlhs.org](mailto:tplath@mvlhs.org).

## NAMES WANTED

**Military**—congregations members, family, or friends, who serve in the Armed Forces and desire spiritual services. Complete an online referral form at [wels.net/military-services](http://wels.net/military-services). Include as much information as possible; e-mail addresses are especially important. Special Ministries, 414-256-3241; [csm@wels.net](mailto:csm@wels.net).

**College students**—Register college students with WELS Campus Ministry so they receive helpful college materials, including *Forward in Christ* magazine and *Meditations*. Website, [wels.net/campus-ministry](http://wels.net/campus-ministry).

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS WANTED

In an effort to reclaim storage space, church leaders often discard documents, not realizing that they tell the story of God's grace in the congregations and the synod. If you have items related to the history of your congregation, even bulletins from special services, forward them to the synod archives, which are housed on the seminary campus. Send documents to WELS Archives, 11831 N Seminary Dr, Mequon WI 53092.

To place an announcement, call 414-256-3210; [bulletinboard@wels.net](mailto:bulletinboard@wels.net). Deadline is eight weeks before publication date.

## Congregation's garden strengthens roots to its community

"Even though Crown of Life has been located in New Orleans East for decades, there was still a disconnect between our congregation and our community," says Jonathan Kehl, Crown of Life's pastor since May 2013.

Kehl explains that most of Crown of Life's members live many miles from the church, so local outreach is difficult.

"Much of this was the aftereffects of Hurricane Katrina," notes Kehl. "Many of our local members were displaced by the storm and never returned, leaving the church a stranger in our own community."

With two lots of unused land in the back of its property, the concept of a community garden was proposed. In 2014, Crown Community Garden was launched, with a goal of having 13 raised beds that community members can rent at a low rate for their own use. People can also participate in co-op gardening, helping to care for a large growing plot and some fruit trees.

To jumpstart the development of the garden, WELS Christian Aid and Relief gave a grant to Crown of Life to help the congregation build a large tool shed, hook up to city water in the garden area, and send out invitations to community members inviting them to join the garden.

As Robert Hein, chairman of Christian Aid and Relief, explains, the organization has a twofold mission: "We respond on behalf of WELS members to offer aid and encouragement to people suffering from disasters and extreme medical and financial challenges. But we also partner with World and Home Missions to support humanitarian aid projects that help build bridges to share the gospel. As the missions address community needs, they also open doors to tell people about Jesus."

In the past, most humanitarian aid projects were carried out in world mission fields. Recently, though, more projects



Crown of Life's community garden is bringing congregation and community members together in New Orleans East.

are being conducted in home mission settings, especially in cross-cultural situations such as in New Orleans.

Kehl is excited about the interactions he's having with community members as they work in the garden together. In the year since Crown Community Garden has started, one couple has joined Crown of Life and one more is currently in Bible information class. The garden allows Crown of Life members to build relationships in a more natural way than cold calling neighborhood residents and inviting them to church.

"Natural conversations arise about struggles and hopes, which present opportunities to share law and gospel and apply it directly to their lives," says Kehl. "A common question is, 'Pastor, what do you think about . . . ?' People who would never have considered walking into a church are excited to be part of something like our garden."

To learn more about other projects supported by WELS Christian Aid and Relief, visit [wels.net/relief](http://wels.net/relief).

### CHRISTIAN AID AND RELIEF SUPPORTS EFFORTS AROUND THE WORLD

The distribution of 450 tons of maize in Malawi was the largest disaster-related food distribution project in the history of WELS Christian Aid and Relief.

In January, Malawi experienced damaging floods that destroyed or damaged the homes of many families who are members of WELS' sister synod, the Lutheran Church of Central Africa-Malawi (LCCA). Initial relief efforts included providing supplies so these families could construct temporary housing.



The floods also washed away the families' crops. This has been devastating for the local people, most of whom are subsistence farmers. To help families get through until the next growing season, Christian Aid and Relief worked with LCCA church leaders to distribute maize (the staple food of Malawi) to an estimated four thousand LCCA families in about 20 different areas. National pastors oversaw the distribution and conducted devotions and prayers with the families receiving the donations.



## From pulpit to big screen

Ten years ago when Jeffrey Schallert wrote the sermon that he titled “The Advent Fairy Tale,” he never imagined it would one day be turned into a feature film. Schallert, pastor at St. James, Cambridge/St. John, Fort Atkinson, Wis., was merely writing one of his “storytelling sermons,” popular with members of all ages.

As Schallert notes, “Usually you preach the sermon, say your ‘Amen,’ and get to work on next week’s sermon. But I was rather fond of this one, and so I kept coming back to it again and again.” Over the years, “The Advent Fairy Tale” was shared during a chapel devotion for students at St. Paul, Fort Atkinson; on a local Lutheran radio program; and in bulletin inserts for Schallert’s churches.

A friend of Schallert’s passed the bulletin inserts on to Steven Zambo, president of Salty Earth Pictures and a member of St. John, Newville, Wis. Zambo was captivated by the story, which is a creative parallel to God’s plan of salvation carried out through his Son, Jesus. Zambo went on to write and direct the screenplay based on Schallert’s sermon. Now titled *The Return*, the film was released for distribution in November.

“I loved the ‘once upon a time’ aspect to this story,” says Zambo. “The fantasy world is so popular today. It’s an approach of storytelling that crosses ages and cultures. We as Christians can use stories like this to reach people of faith and unbelievers as well.”



The love story that develops between Leah and Yadid (played by Heather Ricks and Simon Jon Provan) in *The Return* provides an allegory for Christ’s love for us.

It’s the kind of story that Salty Earth Pictures exists to create. The production company focuses on sharing stories that will, as its mission statement explains, “challenge minds, lighten hearts, and strengthen souls.”

Schallert has enjoyed watching the journey his story has taken from pulpit to big screen. He notes, “I hope viewers appreciate anew the poignant beauty of the love of Christ and the power that love has to make us better people.”

To learn more about *The Return*, visit [saltyearthpictures.org](http://saltyearthpictures.org).

## Special Reformation 500 service being planned

The synod is planning a special service in downtown Milwaukee on Oct. 31, 2017, to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

“The blessings that we enjoy today—knowing God’s grace and knowing the true God through the Word he has spoken to us in the Scriptures—have come to us as a result of what God did through Martin Luther. For 500 years, the gospel message has been preached and proclaimed to us and through us. Those are blessings that we can’t help but celebrate in a special way,” says Mark Schroeder, WELS president.

The service will be the culmination of two continuing education opportunities for WELS called workers held at the Wisconsin Center in downtown Milwaukee on Oct. 30–31—Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary’s annual symposium and the Wisconsin Lutheran State Teachers’ Conference, which will be inviting WELS educators nationwide to participate. The service, tentatively planned to start at 2 p.m., Tuesday, Oct. 31, 2017, will be held downtown in a venue large enough to accommodate the thousands of called workers attending the conferences as well as all WELS members who are able to attend. “Although worship is taking place at the end of these called workers’ conferences, it is intended as a service of thanksgiving and celebration for all WELS members,” says Schroeder.

Choirs from all the WELS high schools will be invited to participate in the service. “With so many of the synod’s called workers present and choirs from all of the synod’s high schools, I can only imagine the closing service on Tuesday



afternoon, the exact day of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation,” says Paul Prange, administrator of the Board for Ministerial Education and part of the service planning committee.

Special gifts will fund the event. According to Prange, the plan is to offer financial help to called workers whose travel costs might exceed their usual fall conference expenses.

WELS districts and conferences also are planning celebratory events in 2017 on the weekends surrounding Reformation day. The WELS website, [wels.net](http://wels.net), will be updated as information becomes available.

## Where are they now?

*In Forward in Christ, we report the news but aren't always able to follow up. "Where are they now?" is our way of giving you the rest of the story.*

In January 2012, we shared a story about a mission opportunity in India.

### HERE'S A RECAP:

Do you remember "the man on the street"? He's the man whose house is his cot. He didn't smile much, but his heart was warmed a bit through acts of kindness. The last we told you about him left you wondering whether or not he'd join you in heaven.

### SO WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The acts of kindness continued—more food, snacks and fruit now and then; a sweater and a blanket at Christmas; small coloring books and crayons for the grandchildren. Now the smiles came more frequently as he pressed his hands together over his chest in the typical Indian greeting. The ice seemed to have melted!

Then he asked one of the pastors for a Telugu Bible. We don't know if he could read it or not, but it seemed important to him. Then he got sick—very sick. Lung problems, trips to the doctor, a short stay in the government hospital. He'd lie on his cot for hours, his breathing rapid and shallow. He seemed unsettled; perhaps somewhat frightened of death. Pastor Vijay paid him a visit; then another

visit, then another. He was open to instruction in the Word.

The Spirit worked, and Jesus found another straying sheep! Venkataswaru is his name. He was named after a Hindu god. That name is now written in the true God's heavenly book. Pastor Vijay baptized him at Christmas of 2013.

There's more to the story. Pastor Vijay's "home visits" continued (sitting next to his cot in a plastic chair). "Grandpa V.," as we call him, loves to look at *Bible Stories in Pictures*. If you walk past his cot at the right time, you can see Grandpa V. sitting with his grandchildren pointing to the pictures in the Bible story book, asking them to identify the characters in the story. Grandpa V. has become a teacher!

And Grandpa V. has become something more. An older lady was seen the other day standing next to his cot, looking intently at a book. Guess which book? *Bible Stories in Pictures*! Grandpa V. has also become an evangelist!

One day when Pastor Vijay and I were visiting him, I had the opportunity to ask the man what his name is. He told me, and I repeated "Venkataswaru." Then I added in Telugu, "my brother in Christ." He grabbed my hand with a big smile as if to say, "Yes, we'll be together in heaven!"

*Dave Beckman*

*Former friendly counselor in India*



Grandpa V. (left) and Pastor Vijay.

## Let your light shine

*Mike Graff from Crown of Life, Hubertus, Wis., shares a Christmas story that shows how anyone can share their faith and make a difference—no matter what their age.*

For the past few years during Advent, our congregation has partnered with Institutional Ministries to collect personal need items, clothing, and Christmas presents for the people they serve.

Around the middle of November 2014, I was approached by one of my favorite "little people" and asked an important question: "Mr. Graff, are we going to have that Christmas tree for the things to help people again?"

I thanked Grace for reminding me and told her that the Christmas tree should be going up soon. Little did I know she had a plan.

Grace's mom e-mailed me more about Grace's plan. She wrote:

"At the beginning of November Grace asked me if church was going to have 'that tree for the things to help other people' again. I told her we could ask you about it next time we saw you at church.

"A couple days later she asked if I thought our family might want to donate things to put under the tree as well. I told her they probably would love to do that.

"This led to her getting the idea to write a letter to all of her closest friends and relatives explaining Institutional Ministries' mission and asking them if they would help her collect items to donate. She offered to shop for those who didn't feel like shopping.

"She sent out her letters and also told anyone who would listen. She collected \$240, plus numerous bags of items. As she started receiving calls and letters with donations, she insisted we make a shopping list of items that people would really need. She thought of everything from diapers to deodorant to warm blankets to 'Jesus' books ('so that they can learn about Jesus too,' she said). She



Grace Leist gathered Christmas gifts and donations for the people served by Institutional Ministries, including making her own fleece knot blankets.

was amazed at how much she collected! She told me, 'Wow, Mom, my little idea is going to turn into a lot of big smiles!'

"She also decided that she wanted to give something from her personally, so she chose to make fleece knot blankets for babies. At one point, while making the blankets, she was getting frustrated because 'her fingers weren't working well,' so she stopped and said, 'When I'm frustrated I'm just going to think of the happy face of the mom wrapping her baby in this blanket and the warm baby smiling; then I will have perseverance!' (Yes, she does know the meaning of that word!). When she was finished with the blankets, she asked if we could put a ribbon around them with a note that said 'Jesus loves you!' Of course, I said yes.

"She told me she did this because Jesus tells us to help others, so that's what she did."

When given praise for the work she had done, Grace said she didn't do it for that (meaning the praise). She said she did it because she wanted all of these people to know that Jesus loves them.

Oh yes. I did forget to mention something . . . Grace is six years old.

May our triune God keep the fire in your heart for outreach that Grace has demonstrated this Christmas!

Note: Grace, now seven years old, is excited to help collect gifts at Christmas again this year.

## Pooling resources

Serving as a congregation president can be a blessing—and a challenge. Whether it's calling a new pastor or teacher, dealing with financial shortfalls or windfalls, or making long-range plans, there is always work to be done.

"As a church president, sometimes you feel you have the weight of the world on your shoulders," says Dennis Behnke, congregation president at St. John, Woodville, Wis.

To help lighten the load, Behnke started an informal group of area congregation presidents who meet face to face every other month to talk about

Besides being a best practices forum, the group also has guest speakers. Most recently Joel Zank, Northern Wisconsin district president, talked to the group about the call process. "It's really a neat thing to see these men work together, pooling their resources," says Zank. "Pastors get together and have those brotherly conversations in circuits. It's pretty nice when the laymen do that too. It's just good communication between leaders."

Between 20 to 25 church presidents—some who have served for years and some who just have been elected—are a part of the group. "For a new church president to sit down with the guys



District President Joel Zank (front row, third from left) talked about the call process to a group of congregation presidents this past September. The group meets regularly to talk about common issues congregations and congregation presidents face.

common issues congregations and congregation presidents face. Since the group started two years, members have tackled topics such as compensation packages, insurance, the relationship between a congregation president and the pastor, buildings and grounds issues, and how men and women work together in service to the church.

"It's been fantastic for me getting different slants and ways of looking at a situation," says Behnke. "When you're sharing with other people, you realize that you're not in this alone. We're a group. The Lord has placed us in this position, and he is going to help us through."

who have been doing it for a while and to be able to draw from their experience is just fantastic," says Behnke.

Behnke encourages other congregation presidents to start groups in their area. "As a congregation, we can only do this much. As a group of different congregations, we can do that much more," he says. "If we talk to each other, we can take our different strengths and bring them to every congregation."

Want more tips on starting a group like this? Contact Behnke at [d1behnke@frontier.com](mailto:d1behnke@frontier.com).



# Booknook

A look at books published by Northwestern Publishing House.  
For more information, visit [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) or call 1-800-662-6022.

## THE MOM GOD CHOSE: MOTHERING LIKE MARY

Upon reading the first few pages of *The Mom God Chose: Mothering Like Mary*, I had to wonder what I, a woman who was referred to as being of advanced maternal age throughout her entire first pregnancy, could have in common with Mary. I am a 30-something with a one-year-old! What could I learn from a teenager living centuries before me in a very different setting and time? Nevertheless, I ventured further into the book and am glad I did.

Author Sarah Habben writes a book that's part history lesson, part examination of contemporary motherhood, and part devotion for the modern mother.

As we follow the story of Jesus' conception, birth, life, and ultimate resurrection, the author examines the qualities that Mary possesses as the chosen mother of the Savior. We see that these qualities are not wisdom beyond her years, nor a depth of experience. Rather she has an unwavering faith in God's promise and Word. Through hard-

ship and trial she remembers that it is her job to raise the son of God, and that Jesus' purpose is not for her ultimate happiness but to deliver the world from sin.

Through interviews with modern mothers facing a multitude of situations, readers gain knowledge and encouragement. Topics range from how to teach children to pray, how to raise children confident in their faith, and how to deal with technology in your children's lives.

Each chapter concludes with a number of questions to ponder. And, finally, each chapter is wrapped in prayer.

Habben ultimately shows mothers that, though parenting can be a scary and intimidating task, if we rely less on flawed human understanding and realize God's ultimate control, we will be able to worry less and mother better—mother like Mary.

Kristen Zimmerman  
Eden Prairie, Minnesota



Price: \$13.99

## WELS news briefs

### MINISTRY OF CHRISTIAN GIVING

800-827-5482; [mcg@wels.net](mailto:mcg@wels.net)

The Ministry of Christian Giving has published a **revised congregational planned giving manual** to help congregations jump-start a program of promoting planned giving opportunities to members. The manual also shares how to start a congregational endowment fund through WELS Foundation, how to set up a congregational planned giving committee to provide further manpower for carrying out this work, and how to administer an endowment fund. In addition, it provides information on WELS organizations that can help with the process. Download a free copy at <http://mcg.welsrc.net/>



MOVING FORWARD  
IN MINISTRY

The 2015 synod convention launched the **"One in Christ" debt elimination offering** through June 2016 to eliminate the remaining \$4.7 million in synod debt. A new graphic (shown) has been developed to show WELS members how God is blessing the "One in Christ" offerings collected through congregational and individual offerings. Look for the graphic online at [wels.net/oneinchrist](http://wels.net/oneinchrist) and in other publications to see how offerings are growing as we work together to move forward in ministry.

Note: The graphic is just an example and not up to date due to publishing deadlines.

## District news

### WESTERN WISCONSIN

**Christ, Merrill, Wis.**, dedicated its recent building addition and renovated space on Oct. 4. WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc., helped the congregation finance the project with a low-interest loan.

### DAKOTA-MONTANA

On Oct. 25, members of **Redeemer, Mandan, N.D.**, worshiped in their new sanctuary and dedicated their new building. The project was financed through WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc.

### MINNESOTA

On Nov. 1, **Shepherd of the Hills, Duluth, Minn.**, dedicated its new addition and renovated space, which includes a fellowship hall, two early childhood classrooms, and an education office. WELS Kingdom Workers' Builders for Christ spent many hours helping with this project, which also received support from WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc.

### HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

**MN—Trinity, Belle Plaine, Minn.**, celebrated its 125th anniversary on Oct. 11.

**NW—First German, Manitowoc, Wis.**, celebrated its 160th anniversary in 2015.

### NORTHERN WISCONSIN



On Sept. 13, St. Paul, Appleton, Wis., celebrated the opening of its early childhood center with a formal ribbon cutting. The center opened on Sept. 1 and can accommodate up to 72 children ages six weeks to five years old.

**SEW**—On Sept. 20, Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, Jackson, Wis., held a Celebration of Ministry service, which honored three men for their anniversaries in the teaching ministry—**Timothy Kuehl** and **Wesley Schmandt**, 25 years; **Darwin Schramm**, 40 years.

On Oct. 4, St. Paul, Muskego, Wis., celebrated the 25 years that **David Kuehl** has served as the congregation's pastor.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., celebrated Prof. **Bill Tackmier's** 25th anniversary in the pastoral ministry on Oct. 16.

On Oct. 18, members of **St. John, Mukwonago, Wis.**, celebrated their congregation's 125th anniversary and their school's 40th anniversary.

The district reporters for this month are: D-M—Dave Ruddat; MN—Jeffrey Bovee; NW—Dennis Kleist; SEW—Scott Oelhafen; WW—Brett Brauer.

## Obituaries

### Ernst M. Lehninger 1917–2015

Ernst Lehninger was born May 2, 1917, in Plymouth, Neb. He died Sept. 10, 2015, in Wauwatosa, Wis.

A 1942 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served Winnebago Lutheran Academy, Fond du Lac, Wis.; Riverview, Appleton, Wis.; Grace, Oshkosh, Wis.; St. John, Wauwatosa, Wis.; and Wis-

consin Lutheran Child and Family Services, Milwaukee, Wis.

He was preceded in death by his wife, Margaret. He is survived by two sons, four grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

### Darryl G. Bruemmer 1934–2015

Darryl Bruemmer was born June 10, 1934, in La Crosse, Wis. He died

Oct. 8, 2015, in Newberg, Ore.

A 1960 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served Zion, Eitzen, Minn.; St. Peter, Oronoco, Minn.; Grace, Oronoco, Minn.; and Gethsemane, Tigard, Ore.

He is preceded in death by his wife, Rochelle, and a son. He is survived by one daughter, two sons, and nine grandchildren.



# Did you ever wonder?

## What are the traditions and myths mixed with the Christmas we observe?

John A. Braun

We have only a little factual information about Jesus' birth from those who were there. Matthew and John were among those who walked and talked with Jesus. Many think that Mark was part of the larger group of followers and wrote for Peter. God guided their recollections so that they wrote what we needed to know.

Luke was a physician who may have known Jesus before his ascension, but he is most likely a later convert who traveled with the apostle Paul and heard information about the birth of Jesus. But he "carefully investigated everything from the beginning" (Luke 1:3). It is not a stretch to believe that he talked with Mary and learned the things she treasured and pondered in her heart (Luke 2:19).

But so much of Christmas does not come from the gospels. The Christians of the first two centuries were content with the gospel accounts. They came to know Jesus as their Savior and, like us,

treasured Luke's account of his birth. With simple faith they learned of his humble birth in Bethlehem. They relied on Matthew to tell them about the coming of the wise men or Magi.

But there are gaps in the story. Isn't there anything more we know about his birth? Curiosity lay sleeping in those first centuries after Jesus' birth. Christians at that time believed, it seems, that Jesus would return soon and there was no need even to celebrate Christmas. But as Jesus delayed his second coming, the curiosity awoke.

### WHEN WAS JESUS BORN?

We know where he was born, but do we know when? That's a fair question. Curious Christians who lived centuries after Jesus was born had difficulty determining the date of his birth. Around A.D. 500, a monk named Dionysius Exiguus created a dating system that chose to make the birth of Jesus the beginning of a new age—the time

before Christ and the time after Christ. Unfortunately, the date chosen was not accurate. Later searches for the exact year proved that Herod the Great died four years before the dating system said Christ was born. That makes our current dates at least four years—perhaps even six years—off. Remember that Herod killed the boys in Bethlehem two years old or younger (Matthew 2:16).

And what about the day and time Jesus was born? No one could go to the town clerk of Bethlehem to find a birth certificate. The records, if there were any, may have been part of the Roman census, but they were gone. Could anyone suggest the day he was born?

Clearly, the answer to that question is no. But Christians in the third century felt that the coming of Jesus occurred on the day that God created the world. Really? Who knew that? Well, the cycle of seasons always began with the first day of spring and the coming of new life. So the first day of spring was also considered the day God created the world. For these people, spring began on March 25. Some adopted that date for the birth of Jesus, but others began to adopt that day as the day that Jesus was conceived. If you count nine months from March 25, you come to Dec. 25.

Add one more thought from these ancient Christians. The shortest day of the year occurs near that date. From that day the sun grows every day after that. It seemed to suggest that the Son of God could be born in the darkness of that short day because he brought light to the world just as the sun grew in intensity.

The Eastern church settled on a different day for the birth of Jesus. It chose Jan. 6. Some still celebrate that day, or the day after, as their Christmas. Watch the news on Jan. 6 or 7, and you may find a story on the or-

thodox Christmas. Others suggest that Jan. 6 is the day the Magi came to Bethlehem because they came and visited Mary and Joseph “in the house” (Matthew 2:11), not in a place where one would find a “manger.”

None of this is necessarily true. The gospels don’t give us such information.

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## Of all these opinions and traditions the only sure information comes from the gospels.

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We are free to follow the practice of the Christians who have come and gone before we were born. No one knows for sure when Jesus was born. Some suggest that these dates came into being because Christians wanted to make use of the pagan festivals at the time. It’s interesting, but one has to read these as opinions and conjecture. We have no eyewitnesses to interview.

### OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT CHRISTMAS

Curiosity is difficult to satisfy.

Who were these Magi, and how many of them were there? In the middle of the third century, one church leader suggested that there were three. It seems that his choice of three was based on the three gifts the Magi brought with them. But who were they? Their identity and number remain hidden, but that did not satisfy the curiosity of ancient Christians. In the sixth century the Christians in Egypt gave them names. Those names have come down to us as Balthasar, Melchior, and Caspar. In my nativity, they represent three races. One of them is African, another Asian, and another European. Nice thought, but who knows? Others claim that there were 12 Magi.

And what about Mary and Joseph? Do we know any more about them? We know their names from the gospels. Tradition suggests that Mary was about

15 or 16 when she gave birth to Jesus. That is only based on the age when girls gave birth in that era. She was a virgin—a belief we hold because that’s what the Scriptures clearly say.

Was she always a virgin? Some Christians believe that Mary did not give birth to Jesus in the normal way. They

believe that Mary miraculously delivered Jesus so he did not leave her body as all babies do. That left her still a virgin. Yet the Scriptures say clearly, “She gave

birth to her firstborn son” (Luke 2:7), and the simplest way to understand those words is that she gave birth in the normal way any woman gives birth.

Did Mary have other children? Matthew records that the mother and brothers of Jesus wanted to speak to Jesus (Matthew 12:46-49). He later even names them: James, Joseph, Simon and Judas—not to be confused with Judas Iscariot (Matthew 13:55). Were they sons of Mary and Joseph? The debate continues. Some believe that they are later children of Mary and Joseph. Others believe they were children of Joseph by a previous marriage, and still others believe that they were cousins or other relatives. Depending on which of these opinions you adopt, Joseph may have been an old man with grown children or a man who loved Mary and had a normal marriage with her after Jesus was born.

Of all these opinions and traditions the only sure information comes from the gospels. It may not satisfy our curiosity, but it is enough. We believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is our Lord (Explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed). We need no other information no matter how curious we may be.

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*John Braun is executive editor of Forward in Christ.*

## What God can do through one Christian's witness John F. Vogt

"I would really like to meet some of my Albanian relatives, but I'm too old to travel to Albania. My only hope is to meet you in heaven."

These words and several gospel tracts sent to Albania from an elderly American started a new life for Agron and Vitori Mece. The Holy Spirit used the letters and tracts of Robert Maurem of Kenosha, Wisconsin—who is now waiting for us in heaven—to lead the Mecses to saving faith in Jesus. "We read all the materials with our children who wanted to become Christians too," says Agron. Since there were no pastors, Vitori baptized Agron, who in turn baptized Vitori and their two children.

"When we came to know about Jesus, our life began to be more meaningful," says Agron, now a pastor in our sister church in Albania. "We felt that we have something precious in our life and were sorry for those who didn't have that treasure. Something from inside forced or urged us to share what we had learned with others and talk about Jesus and the message of the gospel."

**Agron tells about the life they had known under the communist government of Albania—the only country in the history of the world to outlaw all religion.** "Albania was one of the poorest countries in Europe and totally isolated from the rest of the world. Even worse, religion was prohibited by law. The penal code of 1977 imposed prison sentences of three to ten years for 'religious propaganda and the production, distribution, or storage of religious literature.' Dictator Hoxha's brutal antireligious campaign succeeded in eradicating formal worship, but some Albanians continued to practice their faith clandestinely, risking severe punishment. Individuals caught with Bibles, icons, or other religious objects faced long prison sen-

tences. Parents were afraid to pass on their faith for fear that their children would report them.

"Vitori and I were teachers and fed a steady diet of the government's atheistic propaganda. Even our grandparents were afraid to talk about their religion or to celebrate their rituals before us. We had never seen any religious books. We didn't know what Christmas was—the Christmas tree was called the New Year tree. The only thing we knew was the fact that before communism people practiced their faith."

In the spring of 1995, after communism fell, a WELS mission team led by Pastors Kirby Spevacek and Harold Essmann found the Mecses. "The first Bible studies were held in our house," says Agron. "In 1996 we were legally registered as *Kisha Ungjillore Konfessionale Luteriane ne Shqiperi* (Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church in Albania). I was one of the founders who signed the document. The first Sunday there were 15 children in Sunday school and 22 attended the worship service."

During its 19-year history, the Albanian church has weathered some stormy periods. Three times the WELS missionaries were withdrawn, once because of civil unrest, a second time because of terrorism. On March 13, 1997, after Missionaries Richard Russow and Kirby Spevacek and their families were not permitted to board the last ferry to depart the violent uprising, Agron huddled on the beach with them overnight. The adults used their bodies to cover the children who were terrified by the guns shooting over their heads. The next day they were rescued by a warship of the Italian Navy. When all had boarded, Agron stood alone on the dock; he had no intention of leaving his family or his country. "You can't imagine how we felt when Pastor Spevacek called us from Italy to say they were safe and sound. Tears of happiness rolled down our cheeks as we thanked God they were still alive." Later Russow returned with his family, only to be forced—on

one day's notice—to evacuate after eight months when a threat against Americans from al Qaeda terrorists closed the U.S. embassy. This time the Russows' departure was permanent.

**When no missionaries were present, Agron served as head of the Albanian church.** Finally, after 15 years of interrupted study, he was ordained as a pastor in 2013. He and his fellow pastor, Mikel Bishka, faithfully serve our sister church's two congregations in Tirana and Durres. One of Agron's great joys is now helping to train a young man, Nikola Bishka, to begin the next generation of pastors for the church.

When asked: "How have your 20 years of leadership in the church changed you and your family?" Agron replied, "Working in the

church and now being a pastor is a very great responsibility for me and for my family as well. I have to give my example in all aspects of life. When I preach how God teaches us, I can't act differently in my everyday life. I have to show more respect for my wife who is untiring in helping me in my mission work. I thank God for a wife who is so devoted to her work for the Lord and for her family.

"We feel very happy that we have been blessed by God and our efforts didn't go in vain. We are glad to see the old faces that have come regularly since the opening of our church, and we feel happier to see each new face. We'll never forget the day when five old people after getting confirmation classes became the first members of our Lutheran Church. And thanks to God this group of five has kept increasing, so that now an average of 111 people worship in our two congregations each week.

"We would like to express our gratitude for everything which the people of WELS have done for the ALC. . . . You have opened our eyes and our minds to something we didn't know existed, God's love! You supplied us with gospel-sharing literature which we've translated and distributed widely. And God has used your support—financial and spiritual—to lead many Albanians to faith in the one Savior, Jesus Christ."

*John Vogt is WELS regional coordinator for Eastern Europe.*

Pastor Agron Mece preaching at his congregation in Tirana, Albania; Mece (left) presents Nikola Bishka a certificate signifying that Nikola has completed the first level of his preparations to be a pastor. Nikola's parents, Pastor Mikel and Pavlina Bishka, observe; Agron and Vitori Mece; children presenting a Christmas pageant.

## CONFESSIONAL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN ALBANIA

**Year mission  
work began: 1995**

**Baptized members: 66**

**Average weekly atten-  
dance at worship: 111**

**Congregations: 2**

**National pastors: 2**

**Pastoral students: 1**

**Resident missionaries: 0**

**Unique fact:** The church's two pastors studied for the ministry through the St. Sophia Ukrainian Lutheran Theological Seminary in Ternopil, Ukraine. John Vogt, who then served as rector of the seminary, spent three or four weeks each summer teaching the men in Albania and then held weekly online classes.



# Thankful every day



**A woman counts the blessings in her life—from being adopted to finally getting the siblings she always wanted.**

Alicia A. Neumann

It all started in 1948 with a young, pregnant woman going through a messy divorce. “My mom wanted to get an abortion, but no one would do it. So she went to Flagstaff, Arizona; had me; left me there; and then went home,” says Sandy James, member at Hope, Chino Valley, Ariz.

As Sandy got older, she wanted to find her biological mother—to thank her. “I wanted to thank my mother because I’ve had such an awesome life,” she says. “None of this would have happened if she hadn’t given me up for adoption, and none of this would have happened if it wasn’t for God.”

## GROWING UP

Sandy was adopted when she was a few weeks old by Herb and Lil Bangert, who lived in Flagstaff and had waited 14 years to adopt a child. Sandy was baptized right away at Mt. Calvary, the WELS church that became a central part of her life.

“When I was growing up, everything we did was connected to church,” says Sandy. “We went to church every Sunday, and almost every weekend we did something with someone from church.” She remembers her mother

helping teach vacation Bible school and Sunday school and her parents always trying to make new church visitors feel welcome. “Anytime someone new showed up, my parents invited them over,” she says. “Mom always had a roast, potatoes, and carrots ready—and pie. There was never a Sunday that we didn’t have someone at our house.” She says many of those people ended up joining the church and became good friends with her family.

But even though her house was busy with people coming and going, Sandy says she prayed regularly for siblings. “By the time my parents’ names got to the top of the adoption list again, they were too old to adopt. I had a wonderful life and I was happy, but I was lonely,” says Sandy, recalling how she used to line up her dolls at night and ask God to make them real.

Even though God didn’t give her more siblings, he did give her a large extended family with plenty of cousins to play with. He also gave her a lot of friends whom she met while attending high school at Northwestern Lutheran Academy in Mobridge, South Dakota.

“I loved my years at Northwestern Lutheran,” says Sandy. “There were 18 in our class, and we were all very close.

We studied together, and we lived in the dorms together—we were with each other day and night.” She still keeps in touch with some of her friends, including one of her roommates who was in her wedding and became a godparent to some of Sandy’s children. “Growing up we didn’t have much money—barely enough to send me to Northwestern Lutheran,” says Sandy. “But my parents were willing to sacrifice to send me there, and without them I wouldn’t have had that experience. I can’t thank them enough for it.”

### STARTING A FAMILY OF HER OWN

Sandy was almost done with school when she started dating Pete James, who went to her church. “His family went to our church my whole life, so we always knew each other,” says Sandy. “My senior year I was home from school, and we had a potluck. My mom forgot the cord to her electric skillet, so Pete’s mother sent him over to our house the next day to return it. Then my dad had him stay for dinner.” After dinner, Sandy and Pete went for a ride, and he asked her out. After a few more dates he asked her to marry him, “and we have been married 47 years now,” says Sandy.

God blessed them with five children, including a set of twins. “At one point I had a three-year-old, a two-year-old and twin boys,” she said. It was a lot of work, she remembers—especially when the kids were young and her husband was out of town for his job. “But God was there for us all the time, and it was so special to see him working in my kids’ life.” Sandy says she made sure her children had a Christ-centered education like she had, and all attended Arizona Lutheran Academy in Phoenix.

Sandy is so thankful for everything God has blessed her with, especially her parents, her husband, and her children. “I’ve had a wonderful life!” she says.

### GAINING ANOTHER FAMILY

Fast forward to 2008. Sandy found out that one of her friends had given her son up for adoption many years ago and finally was going to meet him. Sandy was intrigued and contacted the man who facilitated the reunion. He found out that Sandy’s mother was from Tacoma, Washington, and that she had died in 1998.

“I went online and found Mom’s obituary,” says Sandy. “I read it and found out I had a sister and three brothers! My whole life I knew I was adopted, but I had never thought about whether or not I had siblings.”

Sandy found her sister’s information online and called her. “I told her my story, and I could tell she wasn’t buying it. So she asked me to e-mail her my picture. She called me back and said, ‘You look exactly like Mom!’ I almost fell off my chair.”



Sandy (front right), her biological father, and her siblings: (back row, left to right) Grant, Brad, Sue, and Mark.

Soon Sandy was on a plane to meet her sister and brothers in person. She also got to meet her biological father before he died and learned more about the events surrounding her adoption.

Sandy says the reunion was great. “They didn’t have to like me, but they accepted me right away. I think it’s because they are Christians who know and love the Lord,” she says. Since then, they’ve kept in contact and even get together for a camping trip each year.

“I never in my wildest dreams thought I would have any siblings after I grew up!” she says. “Now I have a whole gaggle of them. It’s pretty neat to say, ‘My sister and my brothers.’”

Sandy says she’s seen God’s hand in every stage of her life. “None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for him; I thank him every day,” she says. “Throughout the years I’ve had lots of questions about what happened, but I know God’s in charge and I’m not worried about it. He has always been there for me. Without him, I wouldn’t be here and I wouldn’t have any of this! My life is awesome, and I thank him every day for all of it.”



Sandy’s adoptive parents: Herb and Lil Bangert

*Alicia Neumann is a member at Resurrection, Rochester, Minnesota.*

# The failure of utopias

Jeffrey L. Samelson

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There is one  
reason [utopias]  
will always fail.  
We confess it  
with David:  
“Surely I was  
sinful at birth,  
sinful from the  
time my mother  
conceived me.”

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Do you remember how socialism as a theory was totally discredited by the collapse of hard-core socialism in practice when the Soviet Union fell? A lot of our fellow citizens apparently do not. Many believers also seem to need to be reminded of the fundamental problem with so many once-and-again popular political and economic theories, something that we as Christians should be able to identify and understand better than anyone.

Whenever pure democracy, small-scale communes, and even anarchism have been attempted, they have failed. Inevitably the individuals involved insist at some point on what they want instead of what's good for everyone. Systems that place all power in the person or people at the top—socialism, fascism, monarchies, oligarchies, even representative democracies—unavoidably find at least some leaders looking out first for themselves, no matter how much they claim to be looking out for their fellow citizens.

Though we can cite various political and economic reasons why theorists and politicians have never produced the utopias they promised, there is one reason they will always fail. We confess it with David: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5).

Any system, promise, plan, or appeal is doomed to fail when it is based on the idea that if we just remove obstacles *a*, *b*, and *c* and make changes *x*, *y*, and *z*, then everyone will do the right thing and we will have peace, equality, an end to discrimination, universal prosperity, a healthy environment, and a lot of other benefits. All those ideas depend on human beings to perfect them, and human beings are universally imperfect.

So there can be no perfect system of government, and the best systems, then, are those that take the negatives of human nature—greed, bias, envy, among other faults—into account rather than ignoring

them or assuming they can be educated out of us. A truly Christian approach to politics will therefore value checks and balances, accept that violence sometimes must answer evil, and recognize that military and police forces will be necessary for even the most enlightened of nations. So if and when we are privileged to choose those who govern us, we choose the wisest, ablest, and the most trustworthy and least self-centered we can, and we try to weed out those with weak character, selfish ambition, and promises that rely too much on the right people doing the right things at all the right times.

Still, even we Christians often put much more trust in people's perfectibility than we should. We speak, act, and vote as though once our party or candidate gets into power everything's going to be fixed. Too often we display a complacent confidence that the people of our society will simply do the right thing even if we keep quiet.

So remember that Scripture tells us that the purpose of government is primarily the protection of the people and the restraint of evil. Pray, and then pay close attention to candidates' and parties' promises and principles, whether from the left or right or middle. Ask yourself: Are they pretending that people can be perfected, that given the right conditions, laws, funding, schooling, or programs everyone will do the right thing and peace and prosperity will be just around the corner? If so, then beware. We've seen that before. That will never work, and we always have known why.

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## Matthew chapter 1 lists the ancestors of Jesus. You will learn more about your Savior as we trace through segments of his family tree.

**Though the terminal illness of sin affects us all, God uses daily events to draw us closer to him until we see him in heaven.**

All I want for Christmas is . . . a terminal illness.

Wait. He wants what?!?

Yeah, I'm guessing that a terminal illness isn't likely to hit the wish list for any of us this Christmas season. But that's the situation in which Hezekiah found himself.

### HEZEKIAH'S TERMINAL ILLNESS

Hezekiah was a young man, probably 39 years old (compare 2 Kings 18:2 and 2 Kings 20:6). He became ill, and it was clear that his life was in danger. Isaiah was sent to him with the message, "This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover" (Isaiah 38:1). We're told that Hezekiah wept greatly. We're told that he prayed, reminding God that he'd done his best to serve God faithfully.

Interestingly, we're not told that Hezekiah asked for a longer life. Perhaps he desired that. Perhaps he even did ask for it, but we're not told that he asked for it. Regardless, God chose to add 15 years to his life, and Isaiah was sent back to deliver the message.

After his recovery, Hezekiah wrote, "Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back" (Isaiah 38:17; read all his thoughts in Isaiah 38:9-20). As Hezekiah looked at that illness, he could see God's hand of grace. God intended the illness for Hezekiah's benefit. He doesn't detail *how* the illness was for his

benefit. We don't know, but we do know that Hezekiah's focus became "you have put all my sins behind your back."

### OUR TERMINAL ILLNESS OF SIN

Isn't that what Christmas is all about? Ultimately we need a God who is willing and able to put all our sins behind his back. To put it more bluntly, we need a God who is willing and able to forgive us. And as we gaze at the babe of Bethlehem, a descendant of Hezekiah, we see the God who was able—and willing—to come to this earth to win forgiveness of sins for us. That's what we really need!

Because whether we want it or not, we all have a terminal illness—the terminal illness of sin. Death *will* happen.

Yes, it's true that Hezekiah was blessed with 15 more years of life on this earth, but that only delayed the inevitable. Fifteen years later, he died. But every indication we have is that Hezekiah was a believer and went to heaven. So, he didn't really die! While his body ceased to live, his soul lived on as he entered the glories of heaven!

And someday so will you. You too will enter the glories of heaven because of the Babe of Bethlehem, who lived, died, and rose for you. And as God postponed Hezekiah's terminal illness to draw him closer, so God will use the events of everyday life to humble you and me, to focus us on the Word, and ultimately to draw us closer to him.

Even if it takes a terminal illness to draw me close to him forever, then I'll add it to my Christmas wish list. Or a gracious God will add it for me.

*Contributing editor Thomas Kock, a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, is a member at Atonement, Milwaukee.*

This is the fifth article in a nine-part series on people in Jesus' family tree.



# REALPEOPLE REALSAVIOR

Thomas D. Kock



*John O'Brien*

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God declared  
all humanity  
righteous and  
forgiven for the  
sake of this  
Lamb of God.

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# Look, the Lamb of God

The words of John the Baptist echo from the shores of the Jordan River to our Advent season. Seeing Jesus, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

His words bring to mind a couple of things to remember at Advent and long after Advent. The first is that John points to the Savior “who takes away the sin of the world.” I think that’s important because all sinners are included. Jesus did not come just for those who flocked to hear John’s announcement. Jesus came also for those who did not come to hear John.

John said, “the world!” His political sight included the Romans who occupied Judea and perhaps those who visited Judea from other nations. Of course, the world was more than what John saw. It included those he could not have known in parts of the world far away—India, China, what would become the New World. I think he did realize the world Jesus came for included people yet unborn.

That’s important to us all because God’s plan included every soul who would inhabit this world. Jesus paid the penalty for the sins of all people. All sins are taken away! In grace and mercy, God declared all humanity righteous and forgiven for the sake of this Lamb of God. It’s a gift of his grace to all. No exceptions. No exclusions. The sins of the world are taken away.

No one else, except a perfect loving God, can do this. No man, woman, or child is free from sin. And not one citizen of this world is able to do enough good to remove sin. No one can remove his or her own sins, let alone the sins of another person. And certainly not the sins of the world.

Taking away sins is a gift God freely offers to any and every sinner. It can’t be earned. Faith in Jesus simply accepts God’s forgiveness. Sadly, many refuse

to receive God’s loving gift. They remain in their comfortable homes in Jerusalem, New York, Rome, Singapore, or your neighborhood. They don’t have time to be bothered. But those, like you and me, who turn to Jesus trust God’s promise of forgiveness and find peace, joy, and hope in his promise.

The second thought connected to John’s proclamation comes from an observation of Christian churches and their leaders. It frustrates me to see Christian leaders with high profile media presence fail to do as John did—point to Jesus. All too often the message is about social issues like global warming, refugees, tolerance for all, terrorism, and immigration. Not a syllable about Jesus. All these issues are important, but missing an opportunity to say, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” is inexcusable.

Long after all of us are gone, a new generation will face other social issues. Our issues will seem old-fashioned. Only one thing remains—the Lamb of God. He is loving, kind, and generous to sinners.

But a word of warning: Advent reminds us that the Lamb will return. Then he will invite those who trusted his promises to shout, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5:12). The others will be removed from his presence; they did not accept God’s gift and must go on without it as they did while they were here.

John reminded the people on the banks of the Jordan—and us too—“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:2).

# GREAT STORIES OF THE BIBLE

## CROSSING OF THE RED SEA Joel S. Heckendorf

To the east . . . the Red Sea. To the west . . . the powerful Egyptian army breathing down their necks. How did the people of Israel get themselves between this rock and hard place? More important, what would they do now?

Read Exodus 13:17–15:21.

### HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Culminating in the Passover, God sent a series of amazing plagues that loosened Pharaoh's grip, allowing Israel to escape Egypt. With eye-popping excitement, an Israelite could divulge details of how they arrived at the banks of the Red Sea. The frogs. The locusts. The darkness.

But the plagues were in preparation for the trip. God's pillar of cloud did not follow the GPS-recommended route from Egypt to the Promised Land. In fact, the most natural, straight-line route didn't require the crossing of any water. God went out of his way to lead them to the Red Sea. God knew his people. He knew what he wanted for them. And God knew he needed to guide his people to a point where they had no choice but to depend on him.

God knows you. God knows what he wants for you. And God knows the easiest path is not always the best path to get you there. The Christian life is not lived in straight lines. At times God deals us detours. Sometimes those detours lead us right between a rock and a hard place.

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

When the Israelites looked up and saw the Egyptians marching after them, they wanted to go back. They thought being slaves in Egypt was better than the situation that God had presented. Wisely, their God-appointed leader, Moses, encouraged them to wait.

God's delays are not denials. He knows what he's doing even when it appears that we are hemmed in or pinned down. "Do not be afraid. Stand firm. . . . The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still" (Exodus 14:13,14).

Easier said than done. Like Israel, it's so easy for us to blame God for leading us to difficult situations. It's easy

to think, "If only I hadn't followed the Lord." Fellow Christian, do not be afraid. "Stand firm. . . . The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."

For the Israelites, God split the sea in front of them. The situation that once spelled doom now spelled deliverance. But notice where God was. He led them to the difficult situation. But then the angel of God and pillar of cloud went behind them (Exodus 14:19) to protect them.

You can have that same confidence. When God leads you to a difficult situation and you're too afraid to put your toes in the water, know that the Lord who brought you there will move you forward and protect you. No matter what enemies pursue or what walls stand in front, know that the Lord already stretched out his hands to bring you to the real Promised Land.

### EXPLORING THE WORD

1. Tell the story in your own words. Then read the account. Which details did you omit or mistakenly add?
2. Why do you think this story is one of the most popular stories included in children's Bibles?
3. What does this account teach about the difference between fear and faith?
4. Read Psalm 27:14. Relate any biblical or personal examples when you've "wait[ed] for the Lord"?
5. "Move. Pray. Move." Apply God's directive in Exodus 14:15 to your life.

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This is the first article in a 10-part series on the top ten stories included in children's Bibles and how they apply to our lives today. Find answers online after Dec. 5 at [wels.net/forwardinchrist](http://wels.net/forwardinchrist).

Next month: The battle of Jericho

# A larger purpose



**A *National Geographic* article about the migration of arctic terns teaches us an important lesson about Christmas.**

Joel C. Gerlach

Terns migrate from their arctic breeding grounds to the Antarctic each year. It's 12,000 miles one way. Incredible!

In a *National Geographic*\* article about animal migration, writer David Quammen says, "Migrating animals maintain a fervent attentiveness to the greater mission, which keeps them undistracted by temptations and undeterred by challenges that would turn other animals aside." He provides an example: "An arctic tern on its way from Tierra del Fuego to Alaska, for instance, will ignore a nice smelly herring offered from a bird-watcher's boat in Monterey Bay. Local gulls will dive voraciously for such handouts, while the tern flies on. Why? . . . The arctic tern resists distraction because it is driven at that moment by an intuitive sense of something we humans find admirable: larger purpose."

## **JESUS DIDN'T GET DISTRACTED**

It's easy to get distracted in the Christmas season. Distracted from what? From a "larger purpose." The distractions may cause us to forget that Jesus is the reason for the season. He is God, yet "he became fully human" (Nicene Creed) like us to reconnect us to his Father. That, briefly put, was his "larger purpose."

Jesus knew from early on what that "larger purpose" meant for him. "When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship" (Galatians 4:4,5).

And then "when the time was come that he should be received up, he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51 KJV). Jesus refused to be distracted. What he started when he was conceived in Mary's womb, he finished as our perfect substitute.

## **WE NEED TO STAY FOCUSED**

Our identity with Mary's child also gives us a "larger purpose" in life. From Genesis to Revelation God's singular intent is to keep us mindful of that purpose. Peter outlines our purpose in his first letter: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9).

"You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8), Jesus says to us who claim him as Savior and Lord. "You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13,14)—two metaphors for what it means to be his witnesses. Salt can lose its "saltiness" and light can end up "under a bowl" because of distractions. Jesus intends that we, like terns, "maintain a fervent attentiveness to [our] greater mission . . . undistracted by temptations." He wants us to remember that we are instruments "for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2 Timothy 2:21). Our Savior's singular determination to save us is now the motivation for our singular determination to serve him.

So instead of being sidetracked by all the distractions of the season, let them be reminders to us of our "larger purpose." Perhaps we could even adopt the arctic tern as another appropriate symbol for the season.

God bless you and yours in this Christmas season with a renewed appreciation for that larger purpose to which he has called us all.

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\*"Mysteries of Great Migrations," *National Geographic*, November 2010



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK