

Forward in Christ

A LUTHERAN VOICE



Christmas joy

The story of Christ's birth fills our hearts with joy. *Page 10*

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edited by Curtis A. Jahn

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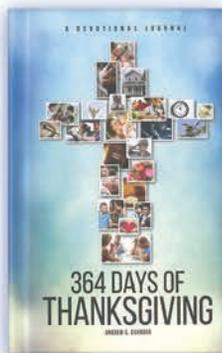
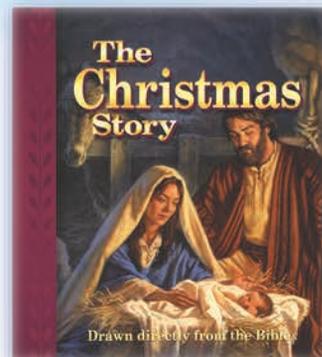
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Christmas
Devotions!

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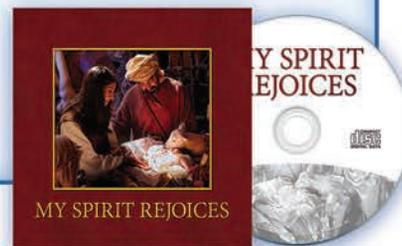
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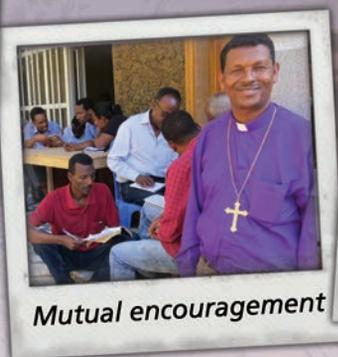
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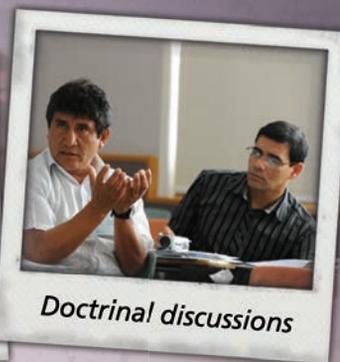
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The Commission on Inter-Church Relations interacts with Christian churches on behalf of WELS, seeking to strengthen and extend the confessional Lutheran church in the United States and around the world. It especially seeks to maintain strong fellowship relations with sister churches in the United States, Scandinavia, Latvia, Germany, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Japan, and Africa.

Learn more about the worldwide churches in fellowship with WELS at www.celc.info.



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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

While the title wording says, “Christmas joy,” Christmas is not a happy time for everyone. But even when worldly fears and problems plague us, we can be joyful—especially at Christmastime.

- In his devotion, Pastor Joel Seifert discusses what it means that God sent his Son to live among us. Jesus’ life wasn’t always happy and idyllic. He lived in a sinful world just like we do, but he still let his love show (p. 7).
- Our cover story explores the ancient predecessor to the famous Christmas hymn “Joy to the World,” a psalm that reminds us of the wonders of God’s love for his people throughout this pain-filled world (p. 10).
- Mira, a member of the Brazilian Lutheran Church, has had a hard life. But she is joyful and says that she has no problems—because she has her Savior. Read more about your sister in Christ on p. 28.

This year, let your joy in the knowledge of your Savior show. Pastor Seifert tells us one way we can do this—through prayer for the martyrs and the innocents. Several news stories also highlight how WELS members are helping others during difficult times in their lives. Don’t miss “Together we can make a difference” (p. 22) and “Helping carry one another’s burdens” (p. 24).

Julie Wietzke



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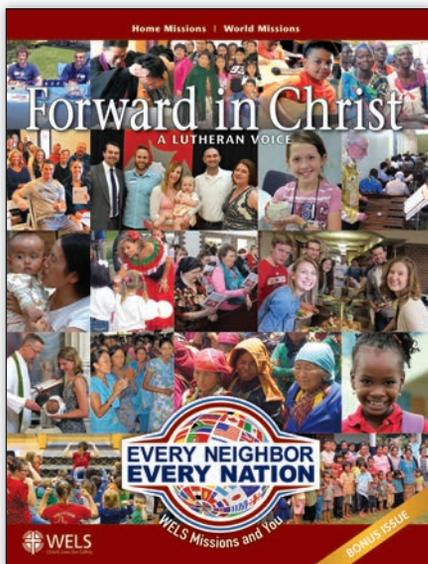
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EVERY NEIGHBOR, EVERY NATION

How I've savored and rejoiced over the bonus Home Mission and World Mission issue of *Forward in Christ!* It was a joy praying over every page as I finished reading each one's accounts of God's blessings on and through the Word we're privileged and charged to share.

Looking forward to rereading this special issue.

*John Keibel
Concord, California*

Thank you so much for the "Every neighbor, every nation" bonus issue of *Forward in Christ*. What a treasure to have all this current mission information in one magazine! I remember 60 years ago, when I was a child, that World Missions in WELS meant one country in Africa, Japan, and the Apache mission in Arizona. To see the centerfold map highlighting over four dozen world missions and new world mission opportunities is staggering and uplifting. See what God has wrought! The Lord is opening the floodgates of opportunities in the world and in our country and calling us to go.

*Lois Kluender
Hartland, Wisconsin*

MORE THAN A PREFERENCE

In "Organs or guitars" [Sept.], Pastor Samuelson cites the common theory

that people's reactions to different styles of worship are often simply "personal preference." He then emphasizes that "the differences go much deeper." This is very true, but it is also true that many reactions labeled mere "personal preferences" already do go deeper than that phrase suggests and thus merit careful consideration.

These concerns are often based on serious factors such as soloists and/or videos displacing participatory worship by the singing congregation; the issue of the good or bad "performance" of the soloist at the mic in front of church so easily replacing the focus on the message being presented; the setting and presentation of worship music resembling the secular entertainment industry more than sacred worship in the house of the Lord; worship styles geared more toward people's perceived tastes than the Lord's revealed nature. Both aspects can coexist, but when the former seems to upstage the latter, worshipers—and quite possibly the Holy One we worship—are understandably upset.

"The conversation we need to be having," as Pastor Samuelson writes, needs to include a close look at factors like these. True, worship style is an adaphoron, but as St. Paul writes on that topic, "Everything is permissible, but not everything is helpful . . . builds up" (1 Corinthians 10:23 HCSB).

*Jonathan Rupprecht
Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

I am commenting on this article from the standpoint of not only being a member of a Lutheran congregation all my life but an organist of over 50 years. (Yes, I am in the category of "Great Aunt Tilly" as mentioned in the article.)

Why had our Lutheran church as well as most other Christian churches used the organ at our services? . . . Might it be because it not only leads but supports congregational singing like no other instrument can?

It is my hope and prayer that much consideration be given before taking

the best instrument for leading and supporting congregational singing out of our churches.

*Shirley Schroeder
Weston, Wisconsin*

CHRISTIAN ROOTS

I was surprised that Pastor Schroer forgot the Hussite church when he claimed, "every non-Roman Catholic Christian church . . . can trace its roots back to the moment Luther's hammer struck that nail" ["Happy anniversary!" Oct.].

This in no way takes away from the importance and impact of Luther's act, but it is good to remember God's Word has always motivated some to stand for its truth. It's not the man that matters; it is God's Word that will remain to the end. That being said, we celebrate Reformation Day every year at my house.

*Shelly Hahm
Hilton, New York*

COVER IMAGE

Why would FIC choose such an unattractive cover for this magazine [Oct.]? I would not share this. I like to leave a copy in the doctor's office or similar places, but this one—NO.

*Jean Rauch
Tinley Park, Illinois*

Send your letters to **Feedback**, *Forward in Christ*, N16W23377 Stone Ridge Dr, Waukesha WI 53188; fic@wels.net. Letters between 100 and 200 words are preferred. Include full name and address. Letters are edited for clarity, conciseness, and relevance. Not all letters received can be acknowledged or used. Writers' views are not necessarily those of WELS or *Forward in Christ*.

CORRECTION

Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, not his local parish—St. Mary's, the state church for Wittenberg—as was written in Pastor Andrew Schroer's editorial "Happy anniversary!" [Oct.]. We apologize for the error.

Traditions with purpose

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. John 1:14

Joel C. Seifert

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, we light the candles on our Advent wreath as part of our evening devotions. Every year my wife warms ham, cheese, and mustard sandwiches in the oven for us to eat as we open Christmas presents after our Christmas Eve service. On Christmas morning, we put on church clothes one more time as we go to celebrate the birth of our King.

Our tradition for Dec. 26 is a little simpler: We recover. We hunt down the last scraps of wrapping paper and throw them in the recycling bin. We graze on leftovers. We call the loved ones we didn't connect with on Christmas Day. We nap.

GOD'S LOVE ENTERED A WORLD OF PAIN

It's so different from what Christ's life was like after Christmas. I marvel whenever I read the Spirit's words through St. John, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." I marvel at God's love in making his home among his people.

But "among us" doesn't just mean being adored by his loving mother and stepfather and some wondering shepherds. From the moment of his first breath, Jesus was living in a sinful, pain-filled world. Even as a baby, Christ lived the perfect life that we haven't lived. As a toddler, he found himself on the run when Herod ordered the murder of the infants of Bethlehem.

WE MINISTER IN THE SAME WORLD

It's good for us to remember that, because God calls us to serve in the same world. Christmas doesn't mean that everything is perfect and happy.

It means that God's love is living and active in a world filled with sin and sorrow. He lived among us. We still live here.

Maybe some old Christmas traditions can help us remember that. Three traditional "minor festivals" fall on the first three days after Christmas. On Dec. 26, the church remembers Stephen, the first martyr of the New Testament church, stoned for his faithful witness to Christ. On Dec. 27, we remember the apostle John. After decades of preaching God's love in Christ, he lived in exile on a prison island. Dec. 28 marks the commemoration of the "Holy Innocents," the children of Bethlehem who were killed in Herod's mad rage.

It seems like such a jarring tradition: Following the joy of Christmas, you see a world's evil—and God's people in the middle of it. But it's good for us to see that.

Christmas . . .
means that God's love
is living and active in
a world filled with
sin and sorrow.

Celebrate Christmas. Then consider a few "new" post-Christmas traditions. The day after Christmas, set aside some time to pray for those whose ministry puts them in harm's way. Pray for your brothers and sisters living in nations that lock up faithful Christians. Pray for our world, where madmen still rage and hurt people



and where even little children are cut down without cause. Pray that abortion comes to an end, that adoptions increase, and that we truly love children the way God intends.

It may seem jarring in the days after Christmas. After all, aren't we supposed to be focusing on Jesus? Indeed, we are. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

Contributing editor Joel Seifert is pastor at Shining Mountains, Bozeman, Montana.



Mark Schwede

Beginning in January 2017, funds used to repay the debt will now become available to support missions, train called workers, and assist congregations.

Free to proclaim Christ

It's a happy day when a couple who has been making mortgage payments for years is able to make that final payment and "burn the mortgage." Young people who accumulated thousands of dollars in student loans look forward to the day when those loans are completely paid off, freeing precious dollars for other important expenses.

By January, the synod will be making its last payment on its capital debt. You may recall that it was in 2008 when the synod combined all of its capital debts into one debt of \$22.4 million. The decision was made to undertake an effort to retire the debt completely by 2018. The effort was begun with a special offering in 2008-09 called the "Year of Jubilee Debt Retirement Offering." The people of the synod gave approximately \$5 million in that initial effort. After that first offering was gathered, the plan was put in place to make annual payments of \$1.6 million to retire the debt by 2018. In 2015-16, with the end of the debt in sight, a second special offering called "One in Christ" was gathered from individuals and congregations. By last summer, over \$2.6 million was given toward debt retirement. Additional gifts were received and regular payments were made through the end of 2016, enabling us to completely retire the debt more than one year ahead of schedule.

Debt in itself is not a bad thing. It can enable people to buy homes and cars when they may not be able to make such large purchases with cash. It can provide funds for larger building projects that may not be possible to do without borrowing. As long as careful plans are made to repay a debt, it may even be an example of good and faithful stewardship of God's blessings.

But in the case of the synod, the debt we faced was causing us to divert precious resources away from gospel min-

istry. Especially in difficult economic times such as these, with Congregation Mission Offerings not keeping pace with inflation, it was clear that we would much rather use our resources in maintaining and expanding the mission and ministry we do together as a synod. Thanks to God's blessings, beginning in January 2017, funds used to repay the debt will now become available to support missions, train called workers, and assist congregations in carrying out their mission.

What a blessing this is! How thankful we can be that God has moved the hearts of his people to respond to this challenge in such a generous and faithful way!

So we are "burning the synod's mortgage." We will not be celebrating our own accomplishment, but we will be celebrating the grace of God for giving us his gospel message and for giving us this opportunity to show our thanks for that message through our gifts of faith and love.

This happy news comes at an important time, a time when God continues to place before our synod opportunities to share the gospel with people and in places that may have been unthinkable only a few years ago. With that perspective, I hope that the news of the retirement of the synod debt is not simply news about money and finances, but a reminder of the privilege and resources that God continues to give us in carrying out his mission. In this case, we do not shout, "We're debt-free!" Rather, we proclaim, "We're free to preach Christ crucified—to as many people and in as many places as he gives the opportunity!"

Light for our path

Since the early Christian church chose Dec. 25 as the day to celebrate Jesus' birth, why is there so much emphasis on worship the night before?

James F. Pope

Anecdotal evidence and congregational worship service statistics supply credence to your question, so let's examine the issues.

A LOST DATE

It does seem unimaginable, but the exact date of Jesus' birth is unknown. God certainly had a time in mind for Jesus to enter the world he created, and when that time had "fully come" (Galatians 4:4), the Lord was born of the virgin Mary. You and I might think that the date of such an important event would have been written on a scroll like Job's words (19:23) or chiseled into tablets like the Lord's words to Habakkuk (2:2). If it was, it did not survive the passing of time. The date of Jesus' birth escapes our knowledge.

AN ARBITRARY DATE

So if we do not know the date of the Lord's birth in Bethlehem, how did the early Christian church arrive at Dec. 25, as you noted? The answer to that question is not entirely clear. Two theories have long been suggested. One states that the early Christian church proposed that late December date to counteract a Roman winter festival that promoted immorality. The other theory imagines that Jesus was conceived and died on the same date: March 25. That would make the day of his birth Dec. 25. Neither theory carries much weight by way of historical evidence and documentation.

Because the date of Jesus' birth is elusive, it comes as no surprise that the Christian church does not agree on when to celebrate it. The Western church opted for Dec. 25 as the day of Jesus' birth, while the Eastern half selected Jan. 6.

As Christians in the Western church, we have a church calendar in which Dec. 25 has long been designated as the Nativity of our Lord, the festival that celebrates the

birth of Jesus Christ. So why is there so much emphasis on worship the night before, you ask? Why does Christmas Eve surpass Christmas Day in importance in some people's minds? I have my own guesses, but that is all that they are. I imagine the sentimentality of an often candlelit evening service is more appealing to people than another morning service. Family traditions, including get-togethers, can take place on Christmas Day, leading people to gather for worship on the evening before.

No doubt there are many other factors involved.

A TIMELESS CELEBRATION

For me personally, the day the church has designated as the celebration for Jesus' birth has more significance than the evening before. Yet I recognize the place of Christian freedom in this area of life. God has not spoken in his Word about our worship schedule. We can freely establish liturgical church calendars. Consequently, it is not surprising to find both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day listed alongside the Nativity of our Lord in liturgical church calendars.

Rather than pitting an evening against a day, that dual listing can encourage worshipers to attend both Christmas celebrations. As with other important events in Jesus' earthly life and ministry, his birth merits more than a single-day celebration.

There is every reason for it to be a timeless celebration.

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. Submit your questions there or to fic@wels.net.

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

Psalm 119:105



**At Christmas,
happy hearts
break into song!
We are filled with
joy because Jesus
has entered our
world of sorrow
and tragedy.**

Daniel A. Witte

Shout for joy

Psalm 98 encourages us to “Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music” (v. 4). Yet such joy often eludes so many.

A WORLD OF SORROW

I stumbled onto an 1803 rhyme. At eighteen, Thomas Love Peacock wrote:

“Quickly pass the social glass,
Hence with idle sorrow!
No delay—enjoy today,
Think not of tomorrow!”
(from “A Glee”)

I happened on those words the day I learned that a friend I first met when I was eighteen had just died. Alcoholism. Now comes his family’s first Christmas without him. Will it be merry? Would beer give more cheer?

Two weeks after the first horror, a police chief in a nearby town killed himself, leaving a wife and two small children.

In both cases, what would you offer to help hollow hearts?

And what of your deepest 2016 grief, whether secret or stretched wide for all to see? Is joy real at all, in a world so worldly, in a mess so messed up? If lasting delight does not come from a bottle, where do you get it?

AN ANCIENT SONG MADE NEW

Yet what if we all sang anew an ancient song that both soothes sorrows and erupts in exuberance?

What if that song needed trumpets of more than one kind to make it loud enough? What if God himself

breathed it out? And what if it were the original “Joy to the World,” wrapping God’s praise with the brightest Christmas bow and more?

Do you hear what I hear? God put the raucous song right in your Bible—Psalm 98. He intends it to be ever new, despite having lyrics perhaps three thousand years old. It’s part of our Christmas every year.

“Let the sea resound, and everything in it” (Psalm 98:7). Think about the fish of the sea singing.

In 2014, *Nature* published a study on how many fish reside in the global ocean at a depth of 200 to 1,000 meters, deeper than fishers can harvest with nets, down where 95 percent of fish biomass might exist.

Researchers discovered that previous estimates of a billion tons of fishes in those waters were low—90 percent too low. In those waters swim probably 11 to 15 billion tons of fishes.

The most common fish, experts note, are bioluminescent bristlemouths. Do you think of chickens as the most common vertebrates on earth? They outnumber people about three to one. The number of chickens worldwide may surpass 24 billion. Yet glowing and swimming deep down in the dark may be thousands of *trillions* of bristlemouths.

All of them are to praise God, says the writer of Psalm 98. And they make up only one species of about two million animal species we can identify on the planet. A million more species unknown to current science may dwell in deeper ocean depths.

The writer of Psalm 98 tells them all, with all people on earth, to shout and sing to the Lord, while rivers clap their hands and mountains shout together for joy before the Lord.

AN AMAZING MESSAGE

“Joy to the world!” Why did Isaac Watts summarize Psalm 98 with those words, when he put the Spirit’s ancient song into rhymed English poetry?

Why should you rejoice too? I’m not talking about just dipping a tentative toe into some subdued celebration, but joining all the globe—even all the oceans and fish—with both wind and string instruments in utter jubilation.

Why shout to the Lord? “He has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (vv 1-3). Likely a Jewish man wrote those words. Whoever he was, he seems to have an odd sense of timing. He sings cen-

turies before the first Christmas as if baby Jesus already lay in a manger in Bethlehem.

That is, the psalmist does not say, “The LORD *will do* marvelous things,” but “he *has done* marvelous things.” He does not predict: “His right hand and his holy arm *will work* salvation,” but states a fact: “His right hand and his holy arm *have worked* salvation for him.”

What if we all sang anew an ancient song that both soothes sorrows and erupts in exuberance?

Mary sang similarly about God, before Jesus was born: “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble” (Luke 1:52). Had proud potentates tumbled from power? Were God’s lowly ones lifted up? Not yet. But God always fulfills his promises. Mary believed.

So do we, as we sing Psalm 98. Here is joy. We believe that as sure as Jesus came the first time to die in our place, he will soon reappear. It’s as good as done. The arrogant will be banished. All creation will worship Christ.

We trust what holy angels sang of the first Christmas night: First, “Glory to God in the highest heaven.” Then, “on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14).

The glory goes first to God because, as Psalm 98 recognizes, “his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation *for him*” (emphasis added).

But think again. He saved for himself? If you rescue someone from drown-

ing, don’t you dive in for the benefit of that helpless person, not yourself? But what could deploy more joy than recognizing that God is different? He did all the saving, all on his own initiative, to glorify his holy name.

And whom did he save, when Jesus took flesh to die for all the world? The psalmist says that the Lord revealed his righteousness to the nations. Again, how odd that would have sounded in Israel. If the Lord uncovered his righteousness not just to Israelites, but to the nations, wouldn’t that be bad news for Israel? Foreigners were so deprived, so dirty, so distant. If the Lord promised to be Israel’s God, how could all of the ends of the earth see his salvation?

But by the Spirit of the risen Christ, who gives us his righteousness as the best Christmas clothes, it is happening. Again this Christmas, believers around the world worship Jesus, from massive Chinese metropolises to tiny refugee camps in northern Iraq.

Two years ago, Iraqi refugees in one camp set up a meager tent with a manger scene. “All you have got left is the love of that refugee child,” explained their British-born pastor. “That to us in the Middle East is all that matters this Christmas.”

Or visualize Christians I met in Uruk Uso, a village in Nigeria. Down dirt roads they stroll, boisterously caroling late into the sticky night on Christmas Eve, blown away by God’s rescue.

JOIN THEM IN SONG

Sing Psalm 98, seeing wonders of God’s love worldwide in believing hearts. And think of the ultimate tomorrow. Long for Jesus’ reappearing, when the song will fully, finally come true: “Joy to the world.”

Daniel Witte is pastor at Trinity, Nicollet, Minnesota.



TRANSFORMING YOUTH MINISTRY

WELS congregations are helping adults build strong foundations for their families—which ultimately impacts youth.

Alicia A. Neumann

“I asked the youth leaders who attended the pilot for my marriage-building session, ‘Are you wondering why we’re spending an hour on marriage building? Your youth members aren’t married,’” says Randy Hunter, pastor at St. Andrew, Middleton, Wis. “Everyone there understood that when the parents have a strong marriage, the kids will do better. And that’s the way God designed it.”

Hunter says this topic has also come up in conversations with community leaders. “I met with the police chief, the principal of the public high school, and the director of a local food pantry. I asked them, ‘What can we, as a church, do to help?’ Their answers were the same: Fix the family.”

BUILDING STRONG MARRIAGES

Hunter says one way to do this is by

improving marriages—something St. Andrew is actively working on. The congregation has committed itself to becoming a marriage-building church by helping Christian couples live the strong connection between the gospel and their marriage.

“Everyone wants a strong marriage, and there’s no shortage of marriage materials out there,” Hunter says. “But so many of those materials lack the gospel of who Jesus is and what he’s done for you. We want to connect the gospel to your marriage. That’s really what makes this distinct.”

Jason Teteak, member at St. Andrew, appreciates his congregation’s emphasis on strong marriages. “Before my wife, Jess, and I got married, we went through a pre-marriage workshop with Pastor Hunter,” says Teteak. “It was just fantas-

tic because it helped us understand how to put Christ at the center of our relationship and how to grow together as husband and wife.”

The Teteaks also have attended marriage retreats. “We love to go to them,” he says. “You’ve got to get into the Bible to grow your faith, and you’ve got to work on your marriage to grow your marriage. God didn’t design us to have marriage without him. When you put him at the center and have your entire marriage founded on that central core—it’s helped us in so many ways.”

For example, he’s seen how his marriage impacts his five-year-old son. “When my son sees me give my wife a hug, he comes over and gets a hug too,” says Teteak. “When your children see the love you and your spouse have, they feel so much love because of that.”

Teteak likens it to when you're on a plane. If the oxygen masks drop down, "you're supposed to put the mask on yourself first, then help the others," he says. "If a marriage is not connected to Christ and it isn't spiritually healthy, the kids suffer. But when the parents are connected to Christ, the kids get to experience that too."

FAITH HABITS FOR FAMILIES

Kristi Sebald, member at Crosswalk, Phoenix, Ariz., agrees that families need a strong foundation—"a strong marriage and a strong spiritual base," she says. But for many families, that strong spiritual base is lacking.

"I've been doing a lot of research, and statistics say that in Protestant America regular church attendance is once a month," says Sebald. "Of those people who say that they belong to church and regularly attend, only 10 percent practice spiritual disciplines at home. So if you think about parents who go to church, only 10 percent are reading their Bibles, or praying with their families, or doing these things that we know affect family culture and transform faith."

Sebald used to serve as the director of children's ministry at Crosswalk. In that role, she was looking for ways to connect to parents. "We wanted to help them be spiritual leaders at home," she says. So she developed a curriculum that cultivates and nurtures faith habits like praying with your child, reading Bible studies, and having family devotions. "They are basically spiritual disciplines that we would do as adults, but implementing them with children," she says.

The idea is to have parents focus on instilling one faith habit in their children per year, from infancy to fifth grade. The parents are invited to attend Sunday school with their kids once each year. They spend about half the time observing the children's lesson, then they learn about the faith habit to do with their child at home.



Children learn "faith habits" as part of the Sunday school curriculum at Crosswalk, Phoenix, Ariz.

"It's amazing to see parents getting involved in their children's faith lives," says Sebald. "Some parents don't know where to start, so we started introducing these habits in small, easy ways that they can absorb into their family culture. They are relieved when they find out that something like family devotions don't have to be a huge production—you can take ten minutes to read a story, discuss two or three questions, and then pray together. These are foundational habits that really will affect a child's faith throughout their lives."

Stacia Weinstein, member at Crosswalk, agrees. "If the kids don't see their parents reading the Bible, they think, *Why should I do it?* If kids don't see it happening, they're probably not going to do it."

Weinstein, who volunteers for Crosswalk's children's ministry, says she's witnessed a lot of blessings over the past year. "At one of the preschool sessions I attended, the teacher went around the circle and asked each child to say a prayer. When it was time for my friend's daughter to pray, she didn't say a word. So my friend went home and worked on praying with her daughter. A few weeks later

in class, the teacher asked the kids to say another prayer. When it was my friend's daughter's turn, she had the courage to say the prayer she had practiced."

Weinstein says this ministry helps the entire family—parents included. "Parents have the best intentions, but other things get pushed into their minds and life gets busy," she says. "This is a great reminder about what's really important; this is eternity. I'm doing this because I want to have my kids with me in heaven. And I want to help other parents achieve the same thing."

Alicia Neumann is a member at Christ, Zumbrota, Minnesota.

This is the last article in a four-part series on the importance of youth ministry.



Hunter and Sebald are both presenters for the new WELS School of Youth and Family called *Transformed: Equipping Youth Leaders*. For more information about this eight-part video series, or to order, visit www.nph.net and search for "Transformed: Equipping Youth Leaders."

After attending Mornings with Mommy sessions, a family finds joining a church body to be a smooth transition.

Rachel Hartman

“Just being a part of a church family is a blessing in and of itself,” notes Kim Baker, who joined the Lutheran church several years ago with her family.

Kim, along with her husband, Chris, had grown up attending church, but they had not found a church to call home for their family after getting married.

That changed after Kim attended Mornings with Mommy sessions at a nearby Lutheran church. Now the family appreciates having a place to worship and the sense of belonging that comes with being part of a church body.

DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS

Both Chris and Kim were born and raised in Missouri. As a child, Chris attended the Catholic church, while Kim went to a Baptist church with her family. “I grew up in a small town and went to services with my grandparents,” she recalls. “I would even take my great-grandma to church.”

When Chris and Kim got married, the wedding ceremony was held in a

Baptist church. During their first years of marriage, however, they realized it would be difficult to find a church home. When they discussed their backgrounds, they noted the Catholic and Baptist churches had stark differences. At one point, they decided to try attending the Baptist church together. “It just didn’t work,” says Kim.

As a result, the couple drifted away from services and from a congregation. “We spent a number of years in our early marriage not going to church,” Kim explains.

One reason involved the idea of a separate place for kids to worship, away from the parents. Chris and Kim were blessed with three children, and with Kim’s background in the Baptist church, she was accustomed to seeing children attend a kids’ church while the adults went to a different area. “The kids were young,” she says. “I wasn’t comfortable going and dropping them off at a place away from me.”

MORNINGS WITH MOMMY

Several years later, while their children were still young, the Baker family moved near Myrtle Beach, S.C. As they settled in, Kim heard from an acquaintance about a program called “Mornings with Mommy” being offered at a nearby Lutheran church.

Kim decided to try it and attended a session with her youngest daughter.

At the time, the program was being held in a temporary space while the congregation worked on constructing a new building.

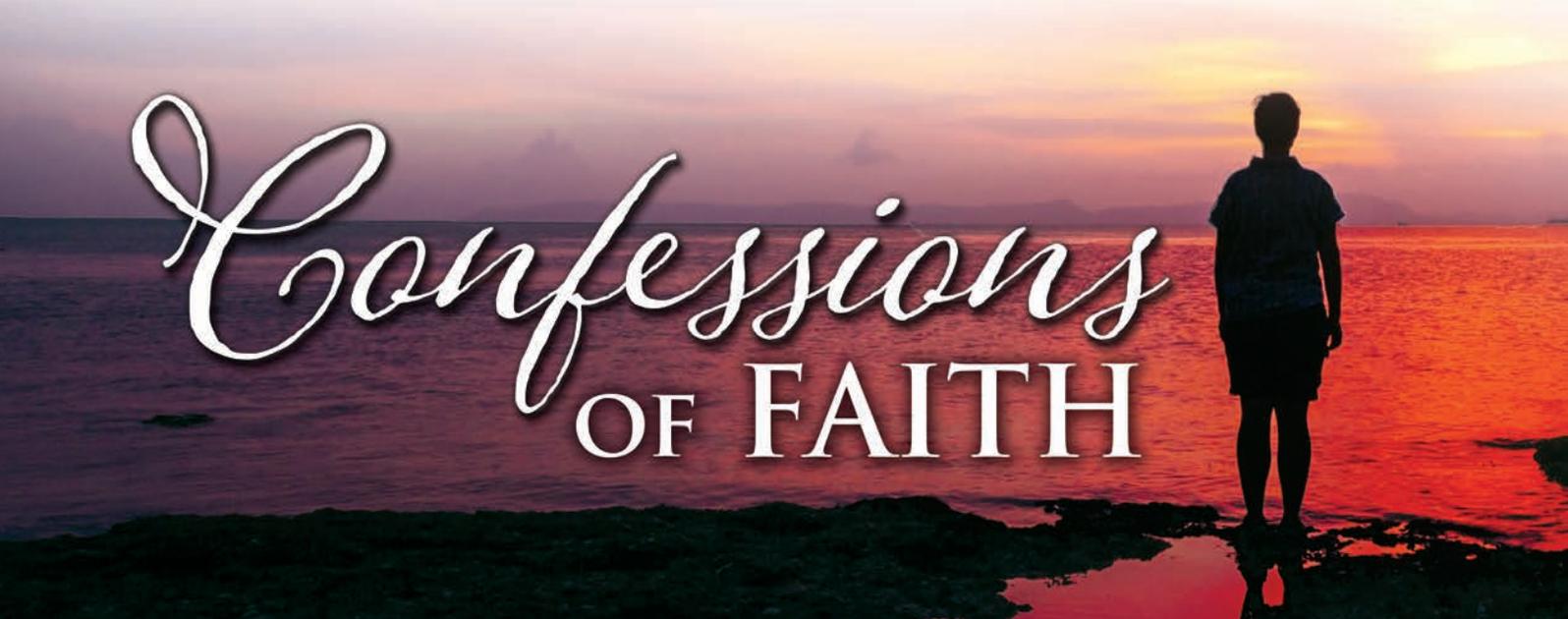
The Mornings with Mommy program offered both structured and play environments. Parents were invited to attend with their child and to enjoy a variety of activities together. The sessions often involved arts and crafts, play time at a sensory table, flannel stories, and a snack. Mothers could mingle with one another during the activities. “It’s a great resource for moms to come in and meet other moms,” Kim explains.

Kim continued to attend Mornings with Mommy for about a year. Then her youngest started preschool, so they stopped going to the sessions. When her daughter had a day off of preschool, however, they went back.

When they returned, Kim noted that the location had moved. The program was no longer offered at a temporary space; it was in a new church building. The pastor’s wife was the director of the program.

Kim enjoyed the program and found it to be a welcoming way to learn more about the church. She mentioned to Chris that the church would be a good place for their family.

The first Sunday the family walked into the church, one of the members



Confessions OF FAITH

greeted Kim with a big hug. “My kids said, ‘Why is he doing that?’ ” None of the family knew the person.

“I said, ‘He’s just welcoming us to church,’” remembers Kim.

The Baker’s youngest child was four when the family first attended worship. At the time, Kim was nervous about how her daughter would act. She was pleasantly surprised to find that no one judged them. In fact, children were encouraged to sit with their families. “They want [kids] there,” says Kim.

After their initial visit to church, the pastor paid a visit to Kim and Chris at their home. “I talked to him about how the kids and I had not been baptized before,” recalls Kim.

There was a reason for this. “With the Baptist faith you have to have this saving-faith moment to be ready to be baptized,” notes Kim. Since the event seemed to require a certain time and emotion, she had never been baptized. And her children hadn’t either.

The pastor came back another night to talk about what the Bible says about Jesus, forgiveness, and Baptism. “The pastor told me, ‘If you want to be baptized, you don’t have to wait until you’re a member,’” recalls Kim. “The kids and I were baptized pretty much immediately after that.”

Chris and Kim began attending worship on Sundays on a regular basis.



Chris and Kim Baker and their family on the day Kim and the children were baptized at Amazing Grace, Myrtle Beach, S.C. Also pictured is Amazing Grace’s pastor, Ben Zahn (back row, far left).

They also completed a Bible information class. When they finished, they were confirmed as members.

SERVING AS A BRIDGE

Kim is thankful for the chance she had to learn more about the church and to become familiar with the environment through the Mornings with Mommy program. “Without the program, we probably wouldn’t be going there,” she notes. “It helps you to get comfortable and is a good tool to get people in the church.”

She has appreciated the chance to let God’s Word speak to her. “It’s a bless-

ing to delve into the Bible and realize, yes, I’m a sinner and God still loves me.” She values the certainty that comes from God’s forgiveness.

As a teacher, Kim has been able to serve at church as well. In addition to teaching Sunday school during the year and vacation Bible school in the summer, she also helps organize a regular basketball camp. She was part of a group that initiated plans to add a preschool to the church. The preschool opened in the fall of 2016.

Chris has managerial experience that he has been able to apply in various ways. He serves as an elder in the church and is part of the executive committee for the preschool.

Living in South Carolina puts the Bakers far away from the rest of their relatives. “Being part of that church family is such a blessing, especially when our family lives a thousand miles away,” notes Kim.

Furthermore, going to church as a family has aided the Bakers in setting the tone for their life at home. “It has helped center and focus our family,” notes Kim. “We’ll have conversations in the car and at the dinner table about the sermon and how we can apply it to our lives.”

Rachel Hartman and her husband, Missionary Michael Hartman, serve in Leon, Mexico.



heart to heart
parent conversations

Our authors this month have some great tips for how to keep your family focused on Christ this Christmas. These are not one-size-fits-all ideas, though. These articles are meant to support you in your Christian parenting journey and to be conversation starters. They are not supposed to make you feel guilty about anything you are or are not doing.

We certainly get enough of that at Christmas, don't we? The guilt? The self-induced stress? The feeling that we need to check certain boxes off in order for our children to have a "perfect" Christmas? Yeah, I've been there, and I've discovered that I'd rather be at the manger. At the manger I find the joy and the peace and the purpose of Christmas. Please join me at the manger this year—and leave your guilt at the foot of the cross, where the babe of Christmas fulfilled his purpose of becoming our Savior.

Nicole Balza

Join the conversation!

Visit wels.net/forwardinchrist and look for the *Heart to heart* link.

HOW CAN WE HELP OUR FAMILY STAY FOCUSED ON CHRIST THIS CHRISTMAS?

Christmas is my favorite time of year. I love the annual reminder that God loved us so much that he sent his son as a little baby to be with us here on earth and, eventually, to pay the price for our sins.

My daughter came home from school recently, horrified, having learned that some people refer to Christmas as *X-mas*. "Mom, they don't even want to say Christmas. They take Christ out completely!"

Part of me was sad that my eight-year-old is becoming more familiar with the ways of the world, and part of me was so thankful that she was deeply troubled by something to which I've, sadly, become desensitized. Her reaction was a powerful reminder to me of the importance of teaching my kids to keep Christ in Christmas.

One of our favorite things to do as a family in preparation for Christmas is to decorate our home. We put up the tree, hang up wreaths, and look through last year's Christmas cards.

But our favorite thing to set out together is our creche. Andy and I have a special set that was a gift from my parents on our first married Christmas. While I set out the shepherds, angel, wise men, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, our kids set up a toy nativity of their own. When Henry was two, he set quite the Christmas scene with Jesus in the manger and all his "guys" (Batman, Spiderman, even The Joker) coming to pay their respects to the newborn king.

Another favorite tradition is participating in and attending our church's Advent By Candlelight service at the start of Advent. There is something so special about sitting next to my daughter and worshipping together, preparing our hearts to celebrate the birth of our Savior.

Each of the past few years, we have received a verse-a-day Advent calendar from that service, and we read it together as a family at breakfast. This, combined with working with my kids to memorize their speaking parts for the Christmas services, is a great start to our days during Advent. (I'm convinced Luke's account of Jesus' birth is meant to be heard in children's voices!)

Our family's biggest blessings in helping to keep us focused on Christ at Christmas are the church and school to which we belong. Worshiping and learning together about the true meaning of Christmas on a daily basis keeps our hearts and minds focused on what matters through the busyness and many distractions of the Christmas season.

Kerry Ognenoff and her husband, Andy, have two young children, Anna and Henry. The family worships at Grace, Milwaukee.



“How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?”

“Change?! We’ve *always* had that light bulb!”

Sometimes we Lutherans can get the reputation for being resistant to change. We’ve always parked in the same spot in the church parking lot. We’ve always sat in the same pew. We’ve always brought the same dish to the church potluck.

But our hesitancy to change isn’t always bad. It’s rooted in our understanding of the value of traditions. Traditions help us learn. Our little Lutherans know the liturgy with ever growing understanding because they hear those same words spoken every week in church. We celebrate baptisms and confirmations to show that they’re special. Traditions teach us values and important truths.

And if there’s any part of the year that’s steeped in traditions, it’s the Christmas season. So many Christmas traditions are *designed* to point us to Jesus. So if we want to keep our kids (and ourselves) focused on Jesus at Christmastime, let’s consider focusing on connecting Jesus to the traditions we already have.

- Do your kids participate in a children’s Christmas program? Be a part of it! Help them memorize their parts and look up the Bible verses in their context. Show your children how they point to Jesus.
- Do you have a nativity scene? Consider letting the kids play with it (or buy an inexpensive one they can use). Don’t set out all the pieces at once. Let the kids move Mary and Joseph across the room a little each day during Advent. Put the baby in the manger for the first time on Christmas morning. Then add the shepherds and start the Magi on their journey down the hall to join the scene by Epiphany. Talk about the story and anticipate the joy of the Savior’s birth.
- Do you buy and eat candy canes? Teach your children how the red and white stripes remind us of the red blood Jesus shed for us, which makes us pure and white as snow. Show them the Good Shepherd’s staff which, when turned upside down, makes a “J” for Jesus.
- Do you decorate a tree in the living room? Teach your children the symbolism behind the tree and its decorations. The lights remind us that Jesus is the light of the world who rescued us from sin. The angel or star remind us of the good news proclaimed. The garland that seems to wrap around the tree endlessly and the tree itself that’s ever green and points to the sky remind us of the beautiful eternity that awaits us in heaven one day soon.

What traditions do you have? What do you do to help you and your family celebrate Christmas? How have you used those traditions to focus on Jesus and on the eternal peace that he gives? Consider engaging in the online discussion at forwardinchrist.net and share your traditions. Maybe one from your family will help my family and others look to Jesus this Christmas.

*Rob Guenther and his wife, Becky, have four sons.
Rob serves as pastor at Grace, Kenai, Alaska.*



More resources to consider this CHRISTMAS

Northwestern Publishing House offers a variety of books, music, nativities, and other resources to help your family focus on Christ at Christmas. Here are a couple newer resources to consider:

The Christmas Star from Afar:

Set up the wooden nativity that comes with this set, and then hide the star each night to create a fun hide-and-seek game throughout Advent. Some families hide candy or little treats with the star. When your children find the star each morning, they move the three wise men to its location. On Christmas morning, the star is found on the top of the stable and your children can move the wise men to worship baby Jesus. This set also includes a hardbound book that includes the Christmas story as well as Scripture verses to read each day leading up to Christmas.



Tidings of Comfort and Joy:

This book of Advent devotions works well for family devotions. The book leads readers through the biblical accounts of God’s Old Testament promises about a coming Savior and their fulfillment in the New Testament through the birth of his Son. Each devotion is a reminder of the good news of Jesus Christ and how he came to earth to live and die for us, which are the tidings of comfort and joy that the angels sang about that first Christmas night.



For more information on these or other Christian books or gifts, visit www.nph.net.

teentalk

Where do you find happiness?

The world tells us the key to happiness is money, but only God can make us truly happy.

Devon Perkins

Yes, I went Black Friday shopping as I'm sure many of you did as well. And, yes, I probably spent more money than I should have. But hey, I got plenty of great deals and saved lots of money! That makes it well spent, right? Not exactly.

When I got home, I was kicking myself for missing some deals. I was more concerned about what I had missed out on buying. But that's crazy, right?

I was left feeling empty inside as I looked at my shiny new possessions. And it's for the same reason that millionaires aren't content and desire to become billionaires. The world tells us day and night that the key to happiness is money and material possessions. The problem is that almost everyone is fooled. Living in America, we're likely in the top percent of richest people in the world. The real question is why don't we feel like we're in the top percent? Why do we always want more, more, more?

It's because money cannot buy happiness. Material possessions can-

not give us happiness. Nothing in this world can give us true, lasting happiness. Ecclesiastes 5:10 says, "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless." We can try and deny it, but that would be foolish. Why else would we always desire more?

If these things, however, don't give us true happiness, what can?

God, of course, is the answer.

God never leaves you wanting for more. God never leaves you feeling empty inside. True happiness is lasting happiness, and what other than God and his love in this world can last? Just think for a moment about how amazing it is that God, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, creator of the heavens and the earth, loves you, and despite your inherent sinfulness, forgives you all of your sins because of Jesus. Knowing this is the only thing that can give you true happiness.

It's okay to want something, but the problem arises when you begin to

covet and stop being content with what you have. This is when you begin to fall into the trap of thinking, *If only I could have this or that, I would be happy.* But Matthew 16:26 says, "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" Material wealth doesn't last. None of your physical possessions can be taken with you past death. Heaven, however, is forever, so you should focus on that rather than your short time here on earth.

I'm going to close with my confirmation passage, which I think fits perfectly with this message. "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5).

Devon Perkins, a junior at Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, Wisconsin, is a member of Holy Cross, Madison, Wisconsin.

CHANGES IN MINISTRY

Pastors

Baumler, Dale R., to Christ, Pewaukee, Wis.
Berg, John C., to Divinity, Saint Paul, Minn.
Boggs, John H., to Hope, West Palm Beach, Fla.
Brown, Matthew J., to Abiding Word, Houston, Texas
Bruss, Wesley G., to St. John, Darfur, Minn.
Clemons, Samuel M., to retirement
Eggert, Jan C., to retirement
Ewart, Michael J., to St. Peter, Appleton, Wis.
Falck, Mark H., to Emanuel, Forestville, Wis.
Hahm, Steven A., to Christ Our Savior, Rockford, Mich.
Hanson, Joshua J., to Christ, Lodi, Calif.
Hoogervorst, James R., to St. Lucas, Kewaunee, Wis.
Kolterjahn, Darrick P., to retirement
Lee, Nau X., to retirement
Lor, Daniel C., to Trinity Hmong, Manitowoc, Wis.
McKenney, Joel A., to St. Paul, Algoma, Wis.
Meier, Dennis W., to retirement
Meyer VI, John H., to St. John, Sparta, Wis.
Monday, William A., to St. Peter, Freedom, Wis.
Rautenberg, Daniel J., to Apache mission
Rutschow, David N., to retirement
Scharrer, Paul A., to retirement
Schroeder, Daniel M., to St. Peter, Modesto, Calif.
Schwartz, Jacob M., to Star of Bethlehem, New Berlin, Wis.
Sheppard, Michael G., to Mt. Zion, Ripon, Wis.
Sternhagen, Joshua D., to Living Hope, Commerce City, Colo.
Stuppy, Donald W., to European civilian chaplain
Tauscher, James W., to retirement
Traudt, Michael J., to retirement
Trembreull, Luke I., to Beautiful Savior, Corvallis, Ore.
Waterstradt, David L., to Hope, Penryn, Calif.

Assignment

Wetzel, Kurtis J., to Cross of Christ, Boise, Idaho

Teachers

Austin, Ginger L., to St. John's, Sparta, Wis.
Bolstad, Gail, to St. Paul, Onalaska, Wis.
Dorn, Andrea L., to St. Stephen, Beaver Dam, Wis.
Eiland, Martha, to Pilgrim, Mesa, Ariz.
Fenner, Roger A., to retirement
Festerling, Kevin E., to Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wis.

Fricke, Becky, to St. John, Baraboo, Wis.
Halter, Ryan C., to Mt. Lebanon, Milwaukee, Wis.
Kent, Brian, to Atonement, Milwaukee, Wis.
King, Sharon P., to retirement
Kopczynski, Priscilla F., to Immanuel, Waukegan, Ill.
Kuehl, Emily R., to Resurrection, Aurora, Ill.
Maddox, Nicole P., to St. Paul, Rapid City, S.D.
Martin, Jana, to St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Wis.
Neujahr, David J., to Beautiful Saviour, Carlsbad, Calif.
Panitzke, Jessica D., to Shepherd of the Hills Preschool, Knoxville, Tenn.
Pappenfuss, Kim S., to Cross of Glory, Peoria, Ariz.
Patoka, Kathryn, to Redeemer, Tucson, Ariz.
Rehberger, Claire L., to St. John, Fremont, Wis.
Uhlhorn, Daneen P., to Beautiful Saviour, Carlsbad, Calif.
Vogel, Jocelyn E., to St. Mark, Lincoln, Neb.
Wockenfuss, Rebecca, to Mt. Lebanon, Milwaukee, Wis.
Zellmer, Rebecca J., to St. John, Juneau, Wis.

SYNOD CONVENTION

The 64th biennial convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod will be held July 31–Aug. 3, 2017, at Luther Preparatory School, Watertown Wis. The convention delegate fee, paid by the calling body the delegate represents, is \$275. The deadline for submitting memorials to be printed in the *Book of Reports and Memorials* is Jan. 15, 2017. Memorials submitted after Jan. 15 and approved for convention consideration will be posted on the convention website, wels.net/2017synodconvention, if they are received by June 15, 2017. Further directions can be found at wels.net/2017synodconvention. Send memorials to the President's Office, N16 W23377 Stone Ridge Dr., Waukesha WI 53188; carla.martin@wels.net.

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 lockbox, which provides effective and efficient deposit processing for the synod. For your

CMO payment to be included in reported receipts for the month, it must be received in the synod's bank lockbox on or before the last business day. An exception is made for December offerings. Gifts received by the bank lockbox up to and including Jan. 9, 2017, will be credited as 2016 CMO, if accompanied by a 2016 coupon. Thank you for your assistance.

ANNIVERSARIES

San Antonio, Texas—Our Savior (50). Dec. 3. Outreach music festival, 2-6 P.M. Dec. 4. Celebration worship, 4:30 P.M.; meal to follow. RSVP requested, 210-696-2716; llobeck@osl-sa.org. Website, osl-sa.org.
Houston, Texas—Christ the Lord (50). Dec. 25. Rite of rededication to ministry service. 281-778-3003. Website, facebook.com/CtL50thanniversary/.

COMING EVENTS

Living nativity—Dec. 2–3, 6-8 P.M. Christ, Eagle River, Wis. Presentations run every 20 minutes. Refreshments provided. 715-479-8307.

Living nativity—Dec. 2–3, 5-8 P.M. Trinity, Marinette, Wis. Presentations run every 20 minutes. Website, trinitymarinette.com. 715-732-9868.

Living nativity—Dec. 3, 4-7 P.M. Martin Luther, Oshkosh, Wis. Website, martinlutheroshosh.com/events/live-nativity.

Living nativity—Dec. 2–3, 6-9 P.M.; Dec. 4, 6-8 P.M. St. Paul's, Muskego, Wis. Presentations run every 20 minutes. Refreshments provided. Website, stpaulmuskego.org. 414-422-0320.

Living nativity—Dec. 2–3, 6-9 P.M.; Dec. 4, 4-7 P.M. St. Paul, Howards Grove, Wis. Presentations run every 20 minutes. Website, stpaulshowardsgrove.org. 920-565-3780.

WELS ministerial education school Christmas concerts—

- Dec. 3, 7:30 P.M.; Dec. 4, 4 P.M. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. 507-354-8221.
- Dec. 11, 3 and 7 P.M. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. 262-242-8100.
- Dec. 11, 3 P.M.; Dec. 15, 10 A.M. Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis. 920-261-4352.
- Dec. 16, 7 P.M. Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich. 989-793-1041.

Mid-term graduation—Dec. 15, 10 A.M. Chapel of the Christ, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. 507-354-8221.

Christian Leadership Experience—Jan. 6–8, 2017. Orlando, Fla. Registration open. Website, christlead.com.

To place an announcement, call 414-256-3210; bulletinboard@wels.net. Deadline is eight weeks before publication date.

Moments with MISSIONARIES

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Geoff C. Cortright



CANADA

Shortly after our Thursday morning Bible class finished, Naomi came to our church office looking worried. “I can’t find my husband, Peter!” she explained.

Peter hadn’t come to Bible study. He only speaks Chinese, and, what is more, he says he is an atheist. Instead, he had gone for a walk but did not come back.

We drove around the neighbourhood looking for Peter. Then we called the police. Soon all the members at the Bible study began searching for him. The afternoon turned into evening, and the evening to night. By the time the police found him, our search party had covered nearly half of Vancouver.

But Peter was not safe and sound. The following week, a brain scan revealed he had a malignant and inoperable brain tumor. The doctors gave him three months. What made it worse was that Peter’s mind was slipping so that he would not even believe he was sick.

Naomi had been wondering if Peter was showing symptoms of early onset dementia. For weeks before this incident, she had been making him come with her everywhere she went—even to church. She sat toward the back, whispering a translation of our worship service in his ear.

Every time people shared Jesus, Peter only said, “I believe in evolution.” He was such a proud man. He fought in China’s communist army as a young man. He educated himself and got into China’s most prestigious university. He was a self-made, successful businessman. Now he did not even know what was happening to him.



After the diagnosis, Naomi invited me to their home to talk to Peter. Naomi translated through tears when we read from Luke 13, Jesus’ comments about turning to God in repentance in the face of dis-

aster. Peter finally agreed to hear more about Jesus.

I desperately wanted to share the gospel with him immediately, but Peter was so weak that he could only stay awake for 15 minutes. I realized my only way to reach Peter was to give Naomi the words to say. As his mind and body went, she was the only one he still recognized. She read the gospels to him and let Jesus do the talking.

Weeks later, Peter was laying on his deathbed in our local cancer centre. Naomi was with him constantly, along with a stream of church members coming to pray for him; encourage him; and, most important, witness to him. He lost his ability to speak, but he communicated to Naomi: “Yes, I believe in Jesus.” Then on the last day he was conscious, he asked to be baptized.

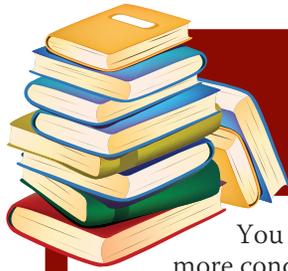
On Aug. 21, Jesus came for Peter. Peter was our congregation’s first funeral. It could hardly have been more improbable. He was a man who, the first time I met him three years ago, told me he had no need for God. A man who had hidden himself in his bedroom when his wife hosted Bible studies in his home. He was never a member of my church. Now he is a member of the Church triumphant.

God taught my members and me important lessons through this experience. He taught me how important the universal priesthood and Great Commission are—I was physically unable to serve Peter by myself. And God taught our Chinese members how he can use them to be his mouthpiece, even to a man who for all but three months of his life would not listen.

Geoff Cortright serves as a home missionary at Saviour of the Nations, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Learn more about Saviour of the Nations’ Chinese outreach ministry in a Moments with Missionaries video at wels.net/missions.

Photo: Members and friends of Saviour of the Nations. Peter is in back wearing a gray hat. Naomi is in front of him in the purple jacket.



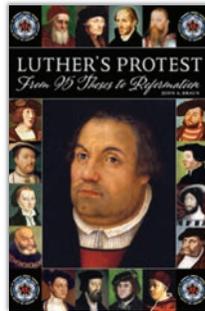
Booknook

A look at books published by Northwestern Publishing House. For more information, visit www.nph.net or call 1-800-662-6022.

You would be hard-pressed to find a more concise chronicle of Reformation-era events than *Luther's Protest: From 95 Theses to Reformation*. Pastor John Braun has condensed volumes of research on this complex and contentious period into a straightforward but thorough history—with only a little Lutheran bias.

Luther's Protest is not a biography, though in it you will find many of the familiar Luther anecdotes you remember from catechism class or sermons. These stories have greater impact as they are sprinkled into the context of 30 years worth of attempts to right the unscriptural practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

As the reform-minded efforts of Luther and his supporters progressed from addressing the sale of indulgences in the Ninety-five Theses to the broader reform statements of the Lutheran Confessions, chapter after chapter demonstrates how these efforts were frustrated by debates, diets, and decrees that gave little opportunity for scripturally-grounded defense.



Price: \$18.99

You will sense both frustration and determination as the reformers stand firm on God's Word against a corrupt church that leans on human tradition and political power.

Our present political climate full of heated rhetoric seems mild compared to the author's numerous accounts of the papal manipulation of rulers like Emperor Charles V and the hateful treatment of "heretics" who opposed the church's authority. It is heartening to read, however, how God controlled those evils to keep his truths alive—though not by means of the reform for which Luther had protested.

Take up *Luther's Protest* as part of your Reformation 500 awareness and celebration. As Pastor Braun shares about his personal objective for writing the book, you also will benefit from reading it with a similar purpose in mind: "I simply want to understand my own heritage as a Lutheran Christian and confess why I believe it to be valuable."

*Peter Schaewe
Jefferson, Wisconsin*

Obituaries

Julie M. Carmichael, 1962–2015

Julie Carmichael (née Jacob) was born Oct. 1, 1962, in Beaver Dam, Wis. She died Oct. 10, 2015, in Menomonee Falls, Wis.

A 1984 graduate of Doctor Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she taught at St. John, Dakota, Minn.; St. John, Lake City, Minn.; Roots to Wings Learning Center, Lake City, Minn.; and Pilgrim, Menomonee Falls, Wis.

She is survived by her husband, Scott; five sons, one brother; and one sister. She is preceded in death by her parents.

Gregg H. Bitter, 1969–2016

Gregg Bitter was born Apr. 26, 1969, in Neillsville, Wis. He died Aug. 12, 2016, in Ridgeland, Wis.

A 1996 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served St. Paul, Litchfield, Minn.; St. John, Hancock, Minn.; St. Paul, Ridgeland, Wis.; and St. John, Colfax, Wis.

He is survived by his wife, Mary; two daughters; one son; his parents; three brothers; and one sister.

Herbert R. Kruschel, 1924–2016

Herbert Kruschel was born Dec. 20, 1924, in Cudahy, Wis. He died Aug. 19, 2016, in Milwaukee, Wis.

A 1949 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served St. John, Cortland, Neb.; St. Mark, Sutton, Neb.; First, Aurora, Neb.; Pilgrim, Menomonee Falls, Wis.; Our Savior's, Port Orange, Fla.; and St. John, Manitowoc, Wis.

He is survived by 3 sons, 2 daughters, 13 grandchildren, and 16 great-grandchildren. He is preceded in death by his wife, Helen.

Glenn H. Unke, 1929–2016

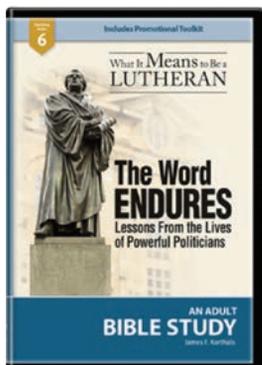
Glenn Unke was born Oct. 18, 1929, in Milwaukee, Wis. He died Aug. 24, 2016, in Sheboygan, Wis.

A 1955 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served Trinity, Wabeno, Wis.; Immanuel, Oshkosh, Wis.; Faith, Oshkosh, Wis.; and Immanuel, Manitowoc, Wis.

He is survived by 3 sons; 2 daughters; 15 grandchildren; and 10 great-grandchildren. He is preceded in death by his wife, Miriam.

Reformation 500 news and updates

New Bible study materials



A series of congregational Bible studies entitled “What it Means to be a Lutheran” is available from Northwestern Publishing House. Two new studies in this series, “The Word Endures, Lessons from Luther Yesterday and Today” and “The Word Endures, Lessons from the Lives of Powerful Politicians” explore key truths from God’s Word as echoed by Martin Luther during the Reformation era as well as examine the politicians in Luther’s day who impacted the work of the church during the Reformation.

Find these and other Reformation materials at nph.net/reformation500.

Community outreach opportunity

The Commission on Evangelism and the Board for Home Missions are preparing materials for four outreach events for congregations. The goal is for congregations to invite their prospects and neighbors to visit and learn the importance of the Bible’s teachings.

The suggested dates and emphases are: Nov. 5, 2017: Scripture Alone; Nov. 26, 2017: Christ Alone; Dec. 17, 2017: Grace Alone; and Jan. 7, 2018: Faith Alone.

Special worship resources as well as promotional and follow-up materials will be available in spring 2017.

Synodwide event canceled

The national-scale celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation in 2017, which was mentioned in this month’s *WELS Connection*, has been canceled.

The plan was to have a pastors’ symposium involving all WELS pastors, a national teachers’ conference attended by all WELS teachers, and a closing worship service for called workers and WELS members in the BMO Harris Center in downtown Milwaukee. But the \$400,000 cost was higher than anticipated.

“We concluded that it would not be wise stewardship of God’s gifts,” says WELS President Mark Schroeder. “In a time of budget planning that involves no increases in synodical spending, we can focus our financial resources on ministry work—spreading the gospel, helping congregations, and supporting our ministerial education schools.”

The fall 2017 pastors’ and teachers’ conferences, as well as the annual symposium hosted by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, will be held in their normal locations.

Information about district Reformation 500 events can be found at wels.net/reformation500. Learn more about Reformation 500 in this month’s *WELS Connection*.



Together we can make a difference

“I never thought I’d be doing this again,” says Linda Hall.

Hall, a member of Crown of Life, New Orleans, and a resident of Baton Rouge, was heavily involved in the disaster relief efforts following Hurricane Katrina 11 years ago. Now God has placed a similar situation for service in front of her.

In August, Baton Rouge received torrential downpours that resulted in three times as much rainfall as that caused by Hurricane Katrina. The resulting flooding left almost 150,000 homes damaged and thousands of families displaced.

Hall, whose home was spared, saw the needs in her community and was grateful when WELS Christian Aid and Relief began to coordinate efforts to rebuild some homes in the area. She and her husband, Randy, have been offering lodging in their home for relief volunteers and land for others to park trailers and RVs. They opened their home in a similar way to the WELS volunteers who helped rebuild Crown of Life and many homes in New Orleans following Katrina.

“We’ve been blessed,” says Hall. “So we need to do something to help people who are hurting. We may be a relatively small church body, but together we can make a difference.”

After initial assessments and meetings with pastors and members at Crown of Life and Cross of Glory, Baton Rouge, WELS Christian Aid and Relief put together a plan to rebuild eight homes, only one of which is a home of a WELS member. The other homes are owned by friends of members.

Randy Baker, the volunteer construction supervisor and a member at Shepherd of the Hills, La Mesa, Calif., was also part of WELS’ relief efforts



Builders For Christ volunteer Dennis Tennier, a member at Good Shepherd, West Bend, Wis., is helping rebuild the home of Gloria Ray. Tennier is in Baton Rouge, La., as part of the relief effort coordinated by WELS Christian Aid and Relief.

in New Orleans. As he says, “I enjoy the fellowship and making contact with non-church people. Most of the homeowners ask at some point, ‘Why are you here?’ Then I think, *Wow! That’s the open door I was looking for so I can share my faith.*”

In mid-October, two unchurched families visited Cross of Glory while volunteers were working on their homes. Baker and the other volunteers were joyful as they worshiped together.

Mark Vance, director of operations for Christian Aid and Relief, reports that 26 volunteers are helping on this project during October and November, some of whom are representing Builders For Christ, a division of Kingdom Workers. Volunteers are hanging drywall, taping, and finishing the spaces.

“This is such an outreach-minded group,” says Vance. “They are planting seeds as they work. What’s better than that?”

To learn more about Christian Aid and Relief or to help support its efforts, visit wels.net/relief.

Helping schools intentionalize outreach

A new program from the Commissions on Lutheran Schools and Evangelism is now available to guide congregations on how better to use their Lutheran elementary schools and early childhood ministries for reaching out into their community with the gospel’s saving message.

Telling the Next Generation: Utilizing our Schools for Outreach is a daylong workshop that helps congregation and school leaders focus on their joint mission, build relationships within the church and with school families, and develop an organized program to connect school families with the Word.

“Our schools are recognizing the growing opportunities to reach out to the community with the gospel,” says Cindi Holman, national coordinator of early childhood ministries. “They are finding that just having a child and a family enroll in your school isn’t enough. What they are looking for—and what we’re trying to share with them—are specific ways they can do both outreach and harvest strategies within their school ministries so they can connect people with the means of grace.”

Besides offering information and resources, the workshop allows time for a congregation’s ministry team to meet and work on developing a specific ministry plan to facilitate the outreach they want to do. Assigned advisors also will stay in contact with the congregation to answer follow-up questions and provide additional resources and encouragement.

Risen Savior, Orlando, Fla., hosted the pilot workshop in April 2016; ten different churches attended, including Our Savior’s, Port Orange, Fla.

Our Savior’s started its part-time three- and four-year-old preschool program in 2004 with 27 children in a portable classroom. Twelve years—and two expansion projects—later, the congregation’s early childhood

ministry has 145 children in eight classrooms with a staff of 25 and includes an infant room, childcare, and a preschool.

While the ministry has been blessed with amazing growth, Donn Dobberstein, pastor at Our Savior’s, says the growth presents challenges. That’s why he appreciated the opportunity to bring a ministry team to the workshop. “We really need to keep the biblical focus—especially with so many changes going on,” he says. “You can get so focused on classroom and program that you start to lose sight of why you are doing this.” Dobberstein says that the ministry team at Our Savior’s wanted to walk away with an intentional harvest strategy—how to connect families with the gospel not just in the classroom but in other settings as well.

Since the workshop, the congregation has started movie nights, which bring together school families for fellowship as well as an evening devotion. They also have intentionalized meetings with prospective parents, focusing on preparing each team member to tell and show what makes the early childhood education center distinctively Lutheran.

“It was awesome to go into this workshop and get away from everything that is going on and focus on something that is truly important—how we can use our school for outreach,” he says.

Telling the Next Generation: Utilizing our Schools for Outreach is meant for all Lutheran elementary schools, early childhood ministries, and high schools, whether small or large, growing or struggling. Holman says the goal is to provide one workshop in every district, more if requested, by the end of the 2016–17 school year.

Learn more at wels.net/tellingthenextgeneration.

Helping carry one another's burdens

Sometimes providing the little things is all you need to do to make a big difference.

Just ask Jennifer Bugenhagen, a member at Christ, Big Bend, Wis. She was taking her 17-year-old daughter Katie for a month-long pain rehabilitation program at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., following an arduous three-year journey of countless doctors' appointments, missed diagnoses, diet and lifestyle changes, and thousands of dollars of medical expenses. The program at Mayo was the last hope.

But logistically, going to Rochester was a challenge. Where would they stay? How could they maintain the strict gluten-free diet Katie needed? How were they going to navigate a new city and a large medical complex?

Enter the Church Away From Home program at Ascension, Rochester, Minn. When Jennifer talked to Brian Kom, pastor at Ascension, about her concerns, she thought he would offer some suggestions about a place to stay and where to shop for food. But by the next day, members had donated a guest house for them to use for free, gas money, a clinic parking pass, and help in shopping and paying for Katie's food for her specialized diet. "They literally took care of every single need we had," says Jennifer. "They just took this huge burden off me and carried it for me so that I was free to focus on my daughter."

"Do[ing] good to all people," as written in Galatians 6:10, is the goal of the Church Away From Home program, which members started about a year ago. "Mayo Clinic is making a big push to be a destination medical center," says JoAnn Bunke, the parish nurse at Ascension and coordinator of the program. "We need to react to what is going on in our community. We have a lot of [WELS] members coming to Rochester. How can we help them?"



Besides providing logistical help as they did for the Bugenhagen family, the congregation wants to offer spiritual support—prayers, a church to attend on Sunday, and hospital visits. "Coming to Mayo with serious health problems is a very traumatic time—a time when they really need other people to lean on, to point them back to their Savior," says Kom. "Our church functions as a church family for those people who are away from their own church family."

Through a congregational survey, the Church Away From Home committee identified more than 110 members at Ascension who are willing to help those

coming to Mayo as well as their own members in need—whether it's cooking a meal, offering rides or directions, visiting people, or praying. "It can be the smallest thing—like sending a card at the right time," says Bunke. "It can make such a difference for people."

Bunke understands this from firsthand experience. She and her husband unexpectedly lost their 21-year-old son six years ago and appreciated the overwhelming support they received. "What a difference it makes when your WELS church family is there for you," she says.

Jennifer agrees, "I can't tell you how thankful we are. It was an absolute miracle. God works through his people."

Those coming to Mayo Clinic for health-care needs and looking for support can contact Kom at 507-288-2781. Learn more at churchawayfromhome.org.

Editor's note: The pain rehabilitation program at Mayo was a complete success for Katie. Jennifer shares more about how her faith helped her through her family's complex medical issues in the February 2017 issue.

Through my Bible in 3 years

Read or listen online at wels.net/bible3.

DECEMBER 2016

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|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| 1. 2 Peter 3:1-10 | 12. Da. 7 | 23. Ps. 145 |
| 2. 2 Pet. 3:11-18 | 13. Da. 8 | 24. Ps. 146 |
| 3. Jude 1:1-16 | 14. Da. 9:1-19 | 25. Ps. 147 |
| 4. Jude 1:17-25 | 15. Da. 9:20-27 | 26. Ps. 148-150 |
| 5. Daniel 1 | 16. Da. 10:1-11:1 | 27. Revelation 1:1-8 |
| 6. Da. 2:1-30 | 17. Da. 11:2-20 | 28. Rev. 1:9-20 |
| 7. Da. 2:31-49 | 18. Da. 11:21-12:13 | 29. Rev. 2:1-7 |
| 8. Da. 3 | 19. Psalm 139 | 30. Rev. 2:8-17 |
| 9. Da. 4 | 20. Ps. 140 & 141 | 31. Rev. 2:18-29 |
| 10. Da. 5 | 21. Ps. 142 & 143 | |
| 11. Da. 6 | 22. Ps. 144 | |

District news

DAKOTA-MONTANA

On Oct. 16, **Shining Mountains, Bozeman, Mont.**, held a celebration of ministry service to thank God for 45 years of blessings. The service also included the dedication of the congregation's new church home. Shining Mountains' members worshiped for the past 30 years in a small church that had once been a house. WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc., helped Shining Mountains with funding for this project.

SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN

A group of students from **Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, Wis.**, coordinated a bike drive for the non-profit organization Dream Bikes, which works with at-risk youth on skills that will help them transition to adulthood. Hundreds of bikes were collected in October at drop-off locations at Shoreland Lutheran High School, Somers; Winnebago Lutheran Academy, Fond du Lac; Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Appleton; Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills; and Pewaukee High School, Pewaukee, all in Wisconsin.

SOUTH ATLANTIC

Messiah, Alpharetta, Ga., dedicated its new Christian Family Center on Sept. 18. The 3,500-square-foot addition will provide the 200-member congregation with needed classroom and storage space.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

D-M—On Sept. 25, **Bethel, Sioux Falls, S.D.**, celebrated its 75th anniversary.

NW—**Zion, Kingston, Wis.**, celebrated its 125th anniversary in August.

Riverview, Appleton, Wis., celebrated ministry anniversaries of five called workers on Sept. 18—Pastor **Dennis Belter**, 35 years; Teacher and Staff Minister **Peter Wolfgramm**, 20 years; Pastor **Adam Bode**, 10 years; Teacher **Melissa Nolte**, 10 years; and Teacher **Janise Nolte**, 10 years.

On Sept. 25, **St. Luke, Little Chute, Wis.**, celebrated its 50th anniversary.

ARIZONA-CALIFORNIA



The dual parish of Eternal Life, Concord/Good Shepherd, Vallejo, Calif., has hosted a bocce ball tournament for neighboring WELS congregations for 14 years. Eternal Life and Good Shepherd take turns hosting the event. This year's tournament took place Aug. 27 at Good Shepherd and also included participants from St. Mark, Citrus Heights, Calif. Pictured are attendees of the 2016 tournament.

Bethany, Appleton, Wis., celebrated its 75th anniversary on Oct. 2.

St. Peter's, Sturgeon Bay, Wis., celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2016.

SA—**Trinity, Castries, St. Lucia**, celebrated its 25th anniversary on Oct. 20.

SEW—On Sept. 18, **St. Paul, Franklin, Wis.**, celebrated its 150th anniversary.

On Oct. 21, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., celebrated the 40th anniversary in the pastoral ministries of **James Korthals** and **James Tiefel**.

WW—On Sept. 11, **St. James, Prairie du Sac, Wis.**, celebrated its 50th anniversary. Several charter members attended the anniversary service.

Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis., celebrated the anniversaries of five professors on Oct. 23—Teacher **Ken Taylor**, 40 years; Pastor **Steve Ehlke**, 40 years; Teacher **Robert Huebner**, 40 years; Teacher **Justin Gregorius**, 25 years; and Teacher **Matthew Prost**, 25 years.

On Oct. 23, Trinity, Watertown, Wis., celebrated the 40th anniversary in the

NORTH ATLANTIC



Ascension, Jacksonville, N.C., saw a need in its community for families with young children to have a place to connect and belong. The congregation began its Mornings with Mommy program (pictured) in fall 2015. "Every other week, it brings people through the doors who otherwise might never have heard of Ascension," says Doug Lange, pastor at Ascension. "Each session provides an opportunity to share a devotion with these families and to make connections."

teaching ministries of **Cheryl Holzhueter** and **James Moeller**.

The district reporters for this month are: AZ-CA—Michael Schroeder; D-M—Dave Ruddat; NA—Philip Gurgel; NW—Dennis Kleist; SA—Jonathan Kuske; SEW—Scott Oelhafen; WW—Brett Brauer.

The Apostles' Creed was used by Christians already in the second century. Is it still important, or is it outdated and obsolete in our world?

John A. Braun

When Luther began his explanation of the Apostles' Creed in the Large Catechism, he wrote, "The Ten Commandments are set so high that all human ability is far too feeble and weak to keep them" (Large Catechism II:2). Why would God give us commandments that we could not possibly keep?

The answer is that they are the diagnosis for the human heart and life. We are sick, suffering from a terminal illness. Sometimes we ignore the pain and misery we endure here. At other times we are troubled by the anguish within and the turmoil in our world. God confronts us with the diagnosis: We are sinners, and so is everyone else. God is holy and powerful and the judge who will punish all who are opposed to him. We do not like that diagnosis, but it is inescapable and crushing, like an unwelcome diagnosis of cancer or some other serious medical problem.

Every painful diagnosis raises the next logical question: Is there any hope? One might think that if we try harder to keep the commandments, we can find such hope. But that is not possible. None of us will ever do enough to change the diagnosis; every effort only emphasizes that we are "too feeble and weak" to keep the commandments as God demands.

So is there hope? Yes, and it comes only from God himself. When we are troubled by the wrath of God that threatens

to punish our sins, God issues promises of love, forgiveness, and peace. That's why the Apostles' Creed follows the Ten Commandments. It is filled with hope!

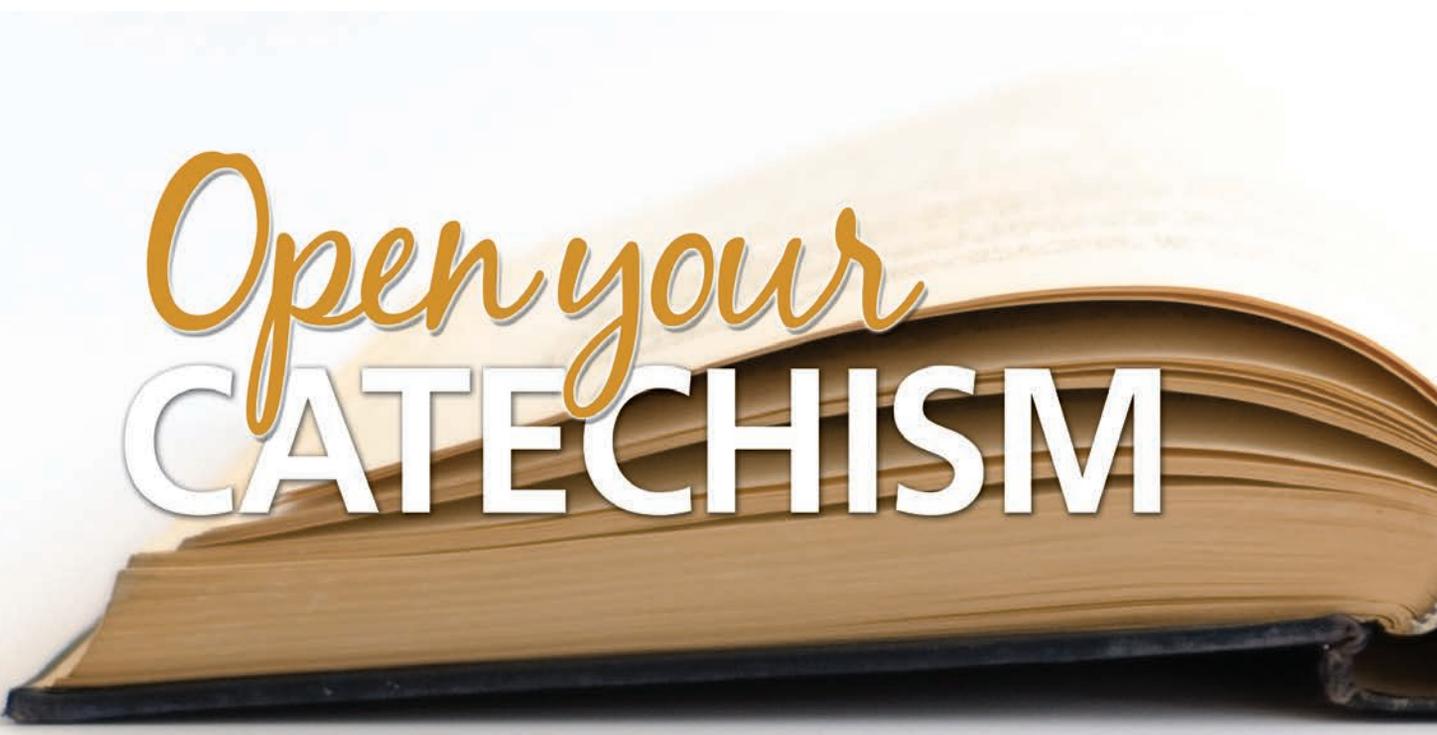
I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY

God directs us to turn our desperate eyes, filled with tears over our failures, to the world around us. It is a beautiful world filled with majestic mountains, breathtaking sunsets and scenery, singing birds, and so much more. He gives this world to us—and to all humanity—in spite of our sins. We deserve none of it. God, the maker of heaven and earth, has created a world of beauty and majesty.

Luther doesn't leave us standing on the beach watching the sunset. He directs us to look at the world in a more personal way. God has made me, he says. Consider our eyes, ears, mind, and abilities! As we carry out our daily lives we enjoy food, drink, clothing, family, and property. All of this comes from the heart of our dear Father in heaven, not because we deserve it, even if we work very hard for these blessings. God gives abundantly because of his love for all humanity.

He is my creator and yours too. Some choose to ignore him as the source of all these blessings. They fail to believe he is the creator. But we confess, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth."

Yet as we pause to marvel at what God has given us and others in this world, hope still hides unknown. We can find relief in the world and life we have, but the diagnosis of the Ten Commandments only has been set aside temporarily. It remains and returns to trouble our hearts. The world we enjoy tells us that a powerful God has a loving heart. He gives us so much. Is there also hope for us as we think of our disobedience and failures?



Open your
CATECHISM

I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST

Here it is: the hope we need—Jesus! Over and above all the temporal goods and the majesty of this created world, God gives us more. He gives us himself and withholds nothing from us. Jesus, God's one and only Son, came here to redeem us. Our sins became his responsibility. Our punishment he willingly accepted.

He redeemed us. In our worship, we confess our faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed. Our words announce all Jesus did for us. He was conceived and born. He suffered under a Roman governor who issued the order to crucify him as a criminal. He was innocent, but because we are criminals—sinners—he became one of us but without sin. He died, and his friends placed his lifeless body in a tomb. But he did not stay there. He rose again. Finished with his work, he ascended. He now rules all things and will return to judge the living and the dead. The hope we have is the forgiveness he achieved for us and the victory over death his resurrection announces. All we have to do is wait for him to take us home—his home—where we will have no more tears, pain, or sorrow.

Jesus is God's remedy for the diagnosis we do not want to hear and so often ignore. Jesus is the mirror of God's fatherly heart toward us unworthy sinners. He did none of the things we confess in the Creed for himself. He did them for us. We have hope in him.

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

It's all too grand and glorious to believe. And on our own, we could not believe it. The Holy Spirit gives us faith so we can confess, "I believe." Yes, I believe that God loves me and that he gives me all the blessings of this life. I believe that Jesus

loves me so much he shed his precious blood for me. I believe. Although I could not choose to believe on my own, the Holy Spirit loved me enough to awaken me through the gospel and bring me to faith so I possess God's hope.

The Creed also asks us to look beyond our personal journeys of faith. When we confess our faith in the house of God, we stand with others. They too have been overtaken and overwhelmed by the love of God. Their voices join ours, and together we are the church—a gathering of believers. The work of the Holy Spirit continues to add to Christ's church those who will confess these truths.

As we all come together for worship, the Holy Spirit continues to work within us. We come into God's house from a week of challenges and sin. We come for the medicine God has prescribed—forgiveness in Jesus. It's a dose we need often. God does not withhold it; he gives it freely by grace.

God has opened the deepest depths of his fatherly heart and his pure undeserved love. The three articles of the Apostles' Creed capture it all in short rich words. We leave the hearing of the gospel in the Creed with God's hope. Now we are ready and willing to serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.

Assignment: Read through the Apostles' Creed and create your own list of things God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has done for you out of love. Think of your list when you confess your faith with the Creed.

John Braun, chairman of the Reformation 500 Committee, is the executive editor of Forward in Christ.

This is the third article in a six-part series on Luther's Small Catechism.



A story of God's grace in Brazil

Beth Flunker

If this story had ended 15 years ago, it would be tragic. It might even bring tears to our eyes. But the Lord saw to it that the story did not end then. It is the story of Clodomira Franco da Silva, born in Brazil in 1953, the sixth of seven children of a family who worked on coffee plantations. We call her, affectionately, Mira.

A TUMULTUOUS LIFE STORY

Her early years were neither good nor bad, just normal for a poor family with many children. "We didn't know any better," she says. "We had each other."

The first tragic event occurred when Mira was five years old. Her father killed her mother and then took his own life. The oldest brother tried to raise the children himself, but he had to go to work all day and the littlest children got into trouble alone at home. One day Mira drank some kerosene that was normally used for the lamps. She was rushed to a neighbor who had a knowledge of herbal healing, and she recovered. But it was clear that the children had to be cared for somewhere else.

The four younger children went to live with their grandparents, who promised not to separate them or give them away. The grandmother took her Catholicism very seriously. Mira says, "I learned all the prayers but didn't know what they meant. My only notion of Jesus was that statue on the cross."

The grandparents did not keep their promise, and soon the children were given away. At age seven, Mira was given to an older couple in a larger city nearby. At first this was a wonderful move for her; she was treated well and could go to school, which she loved. But apparently the good treatment came from the old man. After he died, Mira was treated badly, and it got worse when

the couple's daughter and her two sons came to live with the mother. Mira began to receive regular beatings, and everything was considered her fault.

Mira put up with this treatment partly because she thought she had no other option, but more so because she loved school and wanted to learn as much as she could. But when Mira was 12, the old woman took her out of school so she could earn her living as a maid.

That's when Mira resolved to run away. She scouted the local open-air bus and devised a way out. "I remember to this day the feeling of planning to escape and being afraid it wouldn't work," she says. It took Mira several days to get up the courage to put the plan into action. She was short and skinny, looking more like she was 8 years old than 12. She managed to get aboard the bus mixed in with other families. At the end of the line was the small town where she used to live and where she knew she had an uncle.

But at the end of the trip, when she was the only person on the bus, she had to tell her story to the bus driver. The bruises and marks on her body were obvious proof that she was telling the truth. A kind judge took her to her uncle and settled things with the old woman from whom she had escaped.

For two years Mira lived peacefully with her uncle and his family. "Those were good years," she says. At the age of 14 she began to earn money by being a live-in babysitter for different families. At 17 she was seduced by a local boy, got pregnant, and was sent to another state to live with his relatives until the baby was born. There, once again, she was treated harshly. She and her baby survived and returned to the small Brazilian town. There she ended up marrying a young man who supported her and her son, and gave her two more children. They lived and worked on ranches, and Mira loved the country life and gardening. But her husband frowned on church going, so Mira had no more connection with religion.

Fast forward 15 years. Mira and her husband had moved to Dourados. He had become an alcoholic and sometimes was gone for days and weeks at a time. He left his family to survive as best they could. In those days Mira worked in homes, washing and ironing clothes. On one of his returns, her husband managed to get his wife pregnant again, 15 years after the last baby had been born and with her 50 years old! She gave birth to a healthy baby boy.

THE BEST PART OF THE STORY

Mira was invited by a neighbor to send her one-year-old son to the children's outreach class that was held in her neighbor's house one night a week. The congregation in Dourados has used this method of outreach since it started. The older children took the baby to class every week. And the lady in whose house it was held did what she was supposed to do: followed up with the parents.

Mira says, "If she had not insisted and insisted that I go with her to church . . . I am so grateful to her!" Once she began hearing the

Word of God regularly, Mira's whole attitude was different. She and her daughter were confirmed. Her eyes and her heart had been opened by the Spirit. She knew her Savior and was able to put the past and the present into perspective.

Mira's life is still not easy. Her family is very poor, sustained by the small salary of the older daughter. Their house has the original cement floor and no doors on the rooms, just curtains. The little boy born so late in life is a tall college student, the main keyboard player in the church, and the joy of Mira's life. She and her daughter sacrifice for him so that he can get an education and get ahead in life. Mira shows her faith by greeting people in church, by being cheerful and kind to everyone she meets, by passing out scriptural material, and by inviting her neighbors to church.

When I asked Mira what her problems are now (and having known her for more than ten years, I know what they are), she said, "I have no problems. If I did not have faith, there would be problems. But now I am content. I need nothing else in this life and am ready for my trip home whenever the Lord wants to call me."

And when Mira gets to heaven, that will be the happiest ending to what began as a tragic story.

Beth Flunker and her husband, Missionary Charles Flunker, serve in Dourados, Brazil.

Pictures: Christiano (who plays music for the church), Mira, and Beth Flunker; Mira in her home; Mira (center) and two of her children, her youngest son Christiano and her daughter Ramona; the Lutheran church in Dourados.

Learn more about WELS mission opportunities at wels.net/missions.



BRAZILIAN LUTHERAN CHURCH

Baptized members: 205

National evangelists: 1

National pastors: 2

Number of congregations: 2

Preaching stations: 3

Unique fact: Several missionaries have served in Brazil over the years. Missionary Charles Flunker worked there from when the mission began in 1987 until his retirement in 2006. He continues to minister in Dourados on a volunteer basis during his retirement.



HOPE

for the **HOPELESS**

No matter what situation you are facing, your Savior offers hope and comfort.

Rachel Olson

It's 1 P.M. on a warm spring Friday afternoon when we weave through a sea of hundreds of doctors and nurses, patients and interns, mothers and children, husbands and wives.

ENCOUNTERING A HOPELESS SITUATION

As we make our way through the hospital, I think back over the past few weeks. My painful, unnerving symptoms began, sending me into the nearest doctor's office where serious conditions are eliminated, but the symptoms remain, puzzling everyone I ask. The nurses and doctor scratch their heads and suggest I make an appointment elsewhere.

This scares me. Anxiety takes hold.

Fast forward and a twinge of hope jumps inside of me as we take the elevator up to the third floor. This hospital is buzzing! These are the doctors who teach other doctors to be doctors! We're in the right place. Help is right around the corner.

Until it's not.

I sit on a paper covered seat across from a prestigious doctor who looks down at my chart and says in the flattest tone, "I don't know what's wrong with you. You'll need to find a specialist. I can't help you."

I stare back at her with desperate eyes, pressing her to help. Please offer something. Please see me. Acknowledge this pain, my fear. Offer

a word of comfort. A guess. Something. Anything.

I'm offered nothing.

I swallow hard as anxiety sinks its ugly grip into my heart. I'm left sitting alone in the cold room as my heart thumps loudly inside of me. It's 2 P.M. now on that Friday afternoon.

Good Friday.

Over two thousand years ago the Prince of Peace took up his cross and climbed a hill to shed his blood, suffer hell, and die. He fought death and sin and the devil and WON.

He did that for me. The woman alone in the exam room.

I leave the room, hope slipping through my fingers.

LOOKING FOR HOPE

As we drive home, my husband holds my hand and says aloud, "Is there a better time than this to have such a struggle than the day your Savior showed you just how much he loves you? A doctor might not have answers, but Jesus does. He is here. He sees you. He's the hope you need."

Tears spill over. I know my guy is right. I know the beautiful truth down to my bones, but all my worries and fears are screaming for me to LOOK AT THEM, not to my Lord.

For the days and weeks following, I spend countless moments breathing in the Word. His promises.

"When I said, 'My foot is slipping,' your unfailing love, LORD, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy" (Psalm 94:18,19).

“‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10).

Hymn verses I learned as a young girl slip off my lips, and I sing to stay calm, to touch peace, to remember his promises. I hum the melodies and let the truth woven deep into the words wash over me.

“What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Ev’rything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Ev’rything to God in prayer!”
(*Christian Worship* 411:1).

I scribble notes and tape reminders on the bathroom mirror. I frame comfort for my bedroom walls. I set truth on my bedside table.

I pray for answers, for healing, for peace. I pray for a doctor who will offer help. But above all, I beg for Jesus to be near.

“Be near me Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay
Close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in your tender care,
And take us to heaven to live with you there.”
(*Christian Worship* 68:3).

And in his gracious time, my gracious God brings clearer answers and slow healing. He also brings the most brilliant, kind-hearted specialist who looks me in the eye and says in his beautifully thick accent that he knows what I’m suffering with and can help. I want to hug him and cry my eyes out, but settle for a high five. Dr. H. quickly tops my “thankful for” list—I tell him so each time I see him.

FINDING THE HOPE WE NEED

Through the Holy Spirit, I’ve known my Jesus for 33 years, but I’ve never needed him more, felt him more, saw his love more than in those dark days of spring. It was there in that thin place where my Father showed me again and again that he is all I need. As the flowers bloomed with color and trees stretched into green buds, he breathed new

life into me as I clung to hope, not as a wish, but as an absolute certainty.

I don’t know your sufferings, your pains, your fears, your struggles. But God does.

When circumstances blindside you, who is not surprised?

When your worst fears are a scary reality, who will calm you?

When friends or family disappoint, who will you lean on?

When the worries of your life tug and pull you down, who will pull you out?

When your body betrays you and doctors don’t offer answers, who will bring the answer you need?

When dead ends stare you in the face and you wonder where to turn next, where will you look for guidance?

When the world fails—and it always will—what is left?

All that remains is him.

But your God is not a last resort or a back-up plan, but an All You Need-Peace Giver-Great Physician-Death Defeater-Beautiful Savior-Everlasting Father-Lover of Your Soul-Perfect Answer.

In the dark days, look to the Light and lay the heavy load at his feet. The One who created you, who knows you by name, who redeemed you with his own life, is near.

He’s here.

And when the hurts of this temporary earthly life collide up against the Holy One, he’s going to win each and every time. Even death can’t compete.

On this side of heaven you are going to have troubles and scares, but they are nothing compared to the perfect everlasting life waiting for you (Romans 8:18).

And for me.

Until that day, whether in pain or joy and everything in between, let’s live every breath in thanks and praise for the One who will bring us home.

Glory awaits.

Rachel Olson is a member at Shepherd of the Bay, Lusby, Maryland.

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Too much Christmas?

Jeffrey L. Samelson

Don't miss the once-a-year opportunity to focus on the great and mighty wonder that is the birth of Jesus.

Little Abby was puzzled. "Daddy, when Aunt Emily had baby William and we went to see them at the hospital that night, didn't we go again the next day?"

"Yes, we did. Why do you ask?"

"Well," she said, "why didn't we stay home since we'd already gone just the night before? Hadn't we had enough?"

"Of course not! You know how long everyone, and especially Aunt Emily and Uncle Sean, had waited for a baby, and we were all so excited to see William. It was a really big deal and a very happy thing. I don't think anyone could have 'had enough' of that!"

"Oh. Then what did you mean when you said we wouldn't be going to church on Christmas Day because by Sunday morning we would have 'had enough' of Christmas? Isn't the birth of Jesus a really big, very happy thing for us?"

Even if you've never missed a Christmas morning service in your life, chances are you at least have some understanding of how someone could feel he had "had enough" of Christmas. Maybe it's that one radio station that starts 24-7 Christmas music even before Thanksgiving. Perhaps you've worked retail during the holiday season, and you just can't take any more of the crass commercialism. Maybe it's just the fact that the Christmas displays and catalogs keep showing up earlier in the fall every year, or perhaps too much Christmas is more about overindulging in holiday treats or being overwhelmed by family and social obligations.

We might call it "sugar shock." The complaint that you've had or experienced too much Christmas is usually all about being overdosed with the saccharine sentimentality and the froth and frosting our culture applies to its idea of the holiday. After the zillionth repeat of "Rudolph" and the umpteenth holiday special that extols the "Christmas spirit" but never

mentions Christ, it's easily understandable that a Christian might say, "Enough!"

So go ahead and sequester yourself from the Santas and mute "Rudolph" if it's all too much for you, but don't miss the once-a-year opportunity to focus on the great and mighty wonder that is the birth of Jesus. There's no better antidote to the emptiness of Christless commercialism and seasonal platitudes than the full and nourishing telling—and retelling—of how God promised the world a child who would rescue us from sin and death and then delivered that Son into our human story that night in Bethlehem. God came to be with us—Immanuel—and save us.

So yes, we go to church! We ponder and prepare through the season and services of Advent, focusing on the promises of the Lord to come. And when Christmas itself comes, we sing the songs that actually tell what a really big deal this holy day is. We rejoice to hear the accounts of angels' visits and manger-cribs because Jesus' birth is a very happy thing, and we eagerly come together in worship and fellowship as the people who have peace because of this newborn King.

There's no such thing as too much grace, good news, or glory to God in the highest. Even when we get to heaven, we will never have "had enough" of Christmas.

Contributing editor Jeffrey Samelson is pastor at Christ, Clarksville, Maryland.

The RIPPLE EFFECT

RHODA

After Jesus' ascension, believers spread the gospel around the world in widening ripples.

Daniel N. Balge

Imagine having news so good that no one believes it. That was the predicament of a servant girl named Rhoda.

A BLEAK FUTURE

Rhoda worked in the Jerusalem household of Mary, the mother of John Mark. That household was apparently a hub of activity in the early church. Mark—despite once badly disappointing Paul (Acts 13:13, 15:38)—was “helpful to [him] in [his] ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). Mark also became a close associate of Peter (1 Peter 5:13) and later wrote the gospel that bears his name. But all that lay in the future. Until Rhoda’s wonderful news, the future looked bleak.

Acts 12:1-5 records that the church had just suffered a terrible blow. James—he, with Peter and John, was once of the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples—had been beheaded by King Herod, the grandson of Herod the Great. Because James’ execution had pleased Jewish enemies of the church, Herod had now imprisoned Peter to await trial. Herod put Peter in maxi-

mum security. Four squads of four soldiers each took turns guarding him. Two soldiers guarded the cell door; two were chained to Peter’s wrists. He slept between them. Meanwhile, “the church was earnestly praying to God for him” (12:5).

On the night before Peter’s trial, many of the believers were praying at Mary’s house. Even as they did, their prayers were being answered (12:6-19). An angel appeared in Peter’s cell, forcefully woke him, and commanded him to get up and dress. Peter’s chains fell away. At the angel’s direction he wrapped himself in his cloak and followed the angel past guards and through the main gate. A block from the prison, the angel left him, and Peter found his way to Mary’s home and to the servant girl Rhoda, whose duties included answering the door to the courtyard of Mary’s house.

AMAZING NEWS

Peter knocked and said something to Rhoda, enough that she recognized his voice. She was so happy that she forgot to open the door and ran back to tell those praying for Peter, “Peter is at the door!”

“You’re out of your mind,” they replied, rejecting the idea that God would answer their prayer so wonderfully so soon (vv. 14,15).

But she kept insisting and Peter kept knocking, and at last the courtyard door was opened to great celebration. Peter signaled for quiet and told the group to get word of his freedom to the other leaders of the church. Then he changed locations. Herod still wanted to kill him. After a strenuous search for him, Herod executed the guards on whose watch Peter had escaped.

Scripture records nothing further of Rhoda. But let’s not remember her only for leaving Peter at the door. Consider this detail: In the dark of night, through a thick door, in a time of danger to Christians, she recognized Peter’s voice when she was not expecting to hear it. It says something about Rhoda that she knew Peter’s voice that well. That voice had told her—maybe many times—something far better than even her news of his escape. That voice had told her the good news of Jesus. Such joy!

Contributing editor Daniel Balge, a professor at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, is a member at St. Paul, New Ulm.

This is the eighth article in a 12-part series on lesser-known New Testament witnesses.



John O'Brien

That baby in
Bethlehem is a
treasured expression
of God's love for a
world so filled
with ugliness.

A beautiful Bible teaching

"Do you actually believe this?" The question often comes when we confess our faith. Sometimes we wince at the question. When we confess that we are sinners and deserve God's rejection and punishment, it's hard for someone else to grasp the reality of sin that exists within us all.

But there are other occasions for the question. "Do you actually believe that God will reject the good people of this world?" The thinking persists that all good people deserve special consideration from God. Yet we confess what the Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

"Do you believe in sin, judgment, God's wrath, and all those bad things? They kill our self-esteem and mentally cripple our children." With that thought, the teachings of the Bible are to be rejected as too unrealistic, harsh, or intolerant—too ugly.

But one beautiful incident from the Bible's pages defies that perception. Yes, some simply will think of it as a myth or fictional story, but it brings us the beauty and purity of God's love for the foul mass of humanity.

One quiet night in a small town in Judea, a mother gave birth to a son we know as Jesus. She was in Bethlehem because the Roman government required her and Joseph to register for taxation purposes. Interestingly, the people mentioned in Luke's account are all real people verified by historical research. Mary delivered her son under difficult circumstances, wrapped him, and placed him in a manger. The story still touches our hearts and the hearts of many. It's simply beautiful.

Then the night sky awoke to the brilliance of angels. Their brilliance terrified the shepherds but also announced the birth of this child who was Christ the Lord. The shepherds went to find the child with Mary and Joseph and

told all who would listen about the beautiful event they had just witnessed.

When the baby is identified as Christ the Lord, the beauty transcends every human imagination; it is magnificent. The Lord is a baby in Bethlehem. Where is the ugliness of sin and judgment so many expect from God? It's a baby instead. This baby is God's love for ugly human sinners who deserve to be dismissed from his presence.

A glance at any newspaper or history book reveals the corruption and filth that pollute our world—abuse, violence, greed, lust for power, rage, envy, discord, and immorality. These things find their way to the highest levels of our society, and they are also evident in every human heart and relationship. It's as the Bible says, "All have sinned."

The beauty is that God chose to provide a solution—an undeserved alternative. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). That baby in Bethlehem is a treasured expression of God's love for a world so filled with ugliness.

"Do you actually believe this?" Yes! Then I have questions: Why does this beautiful truth become so unattractive to so many? Why do some decide it is just a nice myth? Why do they seem to prefer a Christmas without the baby? Why persist in creating and perpetuating a world without the love of God for unworthy sinners?

Ah, God's beautiful wisdom is foolishness and remains so to those who do not and will not see. But the rude manger in Bethlehem holds a beauty that surpasses the most profound thoughts of all those who have not embraced the baby: Christ the Lord. It's no wonder we sing "Joy to the World."

Original sin

Joel D. Otto

“There’s a little bit of good in everyone.”
 “Such a cute baby . . . so innocent.”
 “Everyone’s got the choice to be good or bad. We just have to put people into the right environment so they’ll make the right choices.”

We have all heard such thoughts. It’s the prevailing view today. It is also the view of every non-Christian religion and even many Christian denominations. It’s nothing new. Throughout history, people have believed that they are not that bad, that they can do enough good to earn heaven—or at least make some kind of contribution.

The Bible, however, says the opposite. The Bible teaches that every person who is born of a mother and father inherits a corrupt sinful condition, going all the way back to the first sin of Adam and Eve (Romans 5:12; Psalm 51:5). Of all Christian denominations, true Lutherans believe, teach, and confess this more clearly than most. The Augsburg Confession states: “It is taught among us that since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God” (II:2).

The Formula of Concord explains in even more precise language. “In spiritual and divine matters, the mind, heart, and will of the unborn human being can in absolutely no way, on the basis of its own natural powers, understand, believe, accept, consider, will, begin, accomplish, do, effect, or cooperate. Instead, it is completely dead to the good—completely corrupted. This means that in this human nature, after the fall and before rebirth, there is not a spark of spiritual power left or present with which human beings can prepare themselves for the grace of God or accept grace as it is offered” (II:7).

That is a far cry from believing that we enter the world morally neutral or possess some spark of goodness. That is recognizing and confessing that from the moment of conception we are lost and condemned creatures. We are incapable of taking the first steps toward God. We cannot by our own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus.

The problem with denying the totality and severity of original sin is that people imagine they can do something to earn God’s favor. But how could anyone ever be certain they have done enough? When we confess and understand our absolute helplessness and hopelessness, we can see that salvation has to be entirely, from beginning to end, the work of God for us. And it is. Of that we are certain.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Read Ephesians 2:1; Romans 8:7; 1 Corinthians 2:14. How do each of these passages describe our natural spiritual condition?
2. Why is it so difficult for people to believe the Bible’s teaching about original sin? Why do you think this might be an especially “American” problem?
3. Read Psalm 51:1-12. Explain how the teaching about original sin fits into this psalm of repentance. Why is confessing that we are “by nature sinful” so important in our regular confession of sins?

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This is the third article in a 14-part series on key doctrinal emphases that Luther brought back to light through his Reformation. Find this article and answers online after Dec. 5 at wels.net/forwardinchrist.



The key to setting us free

Christmas means freedom for the prisoners caught in Satan's trap. Joel C. Gerlach

I had just returned from a round of hospital calls. My wife met me at the door. She looked perplexed. "What's up?" I asked. She led the way to our backyard.

Our neighbor had set a trap to catch a wily woodchuck. It had been making a mess of things in his backyard and in our garden. An inquisitive squirrel saw the bait in the trap, checked it out, and sprang the trap door. The squirrel was frantic. It had suddenly lost its freedom. It had cut itself off from the real world of squirrels. Squirrels aren't meant to live in a cage. That's not their native environment. Without further ado, I set it free.

CHRIST OPENED THE TRAP DOOR

Multitudes of people, like that caged squirrel, have cut themselves off from God and the way of life he originally intended. They're trapped. It all started in Eden. Satan sprang a trap door.

But the Creator wasn't about to let that continue. He confronted Adam and Eve with their sin. "What is this you have done?" he asked. But that question was only the prelude to the real reason for the confrontation. He promised to open the trap door, not just for them, but for all of us. Christmas is our reminder that God kept his promise. He sent Jesus to open the trap door.

God used Isaiah to give us a prophetic picture of his intent. He revealed his plan "to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness" (Isaiah 42:7). A time was coming for God "to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'" (Isaiah 49:9).

Then "when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son" (Galatians 4:4). The rest is history.

Shortly after his baptism, Jesus went to Nazareth and to the synagogue there. He read from the scroll of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me. . . . He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners . . . to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then with clarity, he said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21).

WE ARE FREE TO FOLLOW HIM

Christmas means many things. Peace on earth, joy to the world, hope based on real substance are just a few. But underlying everything else, Christmas means "freedom for the prisoners" caught in Satan's trap. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1). Yes, free. But we're not free to do whatever we please. That's actually a form of universal slavery, "for people are slaves to whatever has mastered them" (2 Peter 2:19). Rather we are free from sin's bondage, free now to do whatever pleases our Lord and Master. "Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name" (Psalm 142:7).

We aren't destined to live our lives in an animal cage anymore. That's the real difference-maker between the world's way of observing Christmas and our way of proclaiming the "year of the Lord's favor."

"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed," Jesus said (John 8:36). David foresaw that, and it prompted him to pray, "Keep me free from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge" (Psalm 31:4).

David's prayer is appropriate at any time, also—and especially—in this Christmas season.

Joel Gerlach, a retired pastor, is a member at St. John, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

