

Jesus, our mealtime guest | Blessing those who persecute

Forward in Christ

A LUTHERAN VOICE

God with us

Jesus has come: Immanuel,
God with us. *Pages 7 & 10*



ALL IS CALM ALL IS BRIGHT

This Christmas, look to the manger and find comfort in the newborn King so that all your nights may be calm and bright.



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LU0600753, \$12.99

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LU1601638, \$21.99

Great gift
for kids!

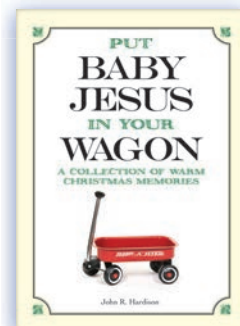


Put Baby Jesus in Your Wagon

by John R. Hardison

Do you remember what Christmas was like as a child? Do you recall the wonder of hearing the nativity story for the first time? Rediscover the meaning and majesty of Jesus' birth in this collection of Christmas memories. Each story features gospel truths, making *Put Baby Jesus in Your Wagon* an excellent new tradition to bring you and your family Christmas joy every year. Softcover, 111 pages.

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Church—to go!

"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15).

Many WELS home missions meet in unique places—hotel conference rooms, rented space in a strip mall, movie theaters, and school gymnasiums. We know it's the people who gather who make it a church, but how do you create a worship environment in these non-traditional places?

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Want to learn more about how this flexible solution is helping home missions reach out with the good news? Check out the December *WELS Connection* and subscribe to weekly mission blogs at wels.net/missions.

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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

God is always with us—in good times or bad, in times of sorrow and in times of joy.

Christmas emphasizes the truth of “God with us” as we celebrate when God physically became flesh to live with humans on earth. Two articles this month dig deeper into this miracle and the peace it continues to offer us today (pp. 7 & 10).

But do we always live as if God is still with us? Or do we sometimes forget he’s there? Do we let our faith show, or is it hard for others to tell that we follow Christ? Our “Salt of the earth” article this month uses compelling real-life examples to highlight a time when it can be difficult to let our light shine: when we are persecuted (p. 26).

Or maybe on the other end, in our zeal to serve our living Savior, we forget the one thing needed—letting him serve us through his Word. Our new Bible study, which is focusing on stories of Jesus as a mealtime guest, starts off by examining the Bethany buffet and how Martha and Mary served and were served by their Savior (p. 35).

Have a blessed Christmas worshiping our Immanuel.

Julie Wietzke



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HEARING THE WORD

"Scripture alone" [back page, Oct.] as well as the whole of the October issue are extremely important! In all, God's Word is where we start.

I know many who grew up in the Word of God, still attend (often with family), hear the truth, and look forward to eternity.

I also know some who went to church with family (some still believers . . . some denying) and today are not being refreshed and strengthened in the Word.

My point—we never want to get away from the Word. "My faith is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."

I'm so thankful for FIC and the many reminders of the importance of hearing the Word!

Lois Tackebury
South Lyon, Michigan

OUTREACH IN PRISON

I had two thoughts while reading [Anonymous'] Feedback letter [Aug.]. The second thought was, *Wow! It is hard to imagine that in the state of Wisconsin where there are so many WELS churches and pastors, we don't have at least occasional in-person services for every incarcerated member of our synod.* This is surely something to pray about, asking God to move hearts toward this goal.

Through my Bible in 3 years

Read or listen online at wels.net/bible3.

DECEMBER 2017

- | | | |
|------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. 1 Corinthians 5 & 6 | 12. Psalm 30 | 23. Ps. 40:1-10 |
| 2. 1 Cor. 7 | 13. Ps. 31 | 24. Ps. 40:11-17 |
| 3. 1 Cor. 8 & 9 | 14. Ps. 32 | 25. Ps. 41 |
| 4. 1 Cor. 10:1-11:1 | 15. Ps. 33 | 26. 2 Corinthians 1:1-11 |
| 5. 1 Cor. 11:2-34 | 16. Ps. 34 | 27. 2 Cor. 1:12-22 |
| 6. 1 Cor. 12 | 17. Ps. 35 | 28. 2 Cor. 1:23-2:17 |
| 7. 1 Cor. 13 | 18. Ps. 36 | 29. 2 Cor. 3:1-4:6 |
| 8. 1 Cor. 14 | 19. Ps. 37:1-20 | 30. 2 Cor. 4:7-5:10 |
| 9. 1 Cor. 15:1-34 | 20. Ps. 37:21-40 | 31. 2 Cor. 5:11-6:10 |
| 10. 1 Cor. 15:35-58 | 21. Ps. 38 | |
| 11. 1 Cor. 16 | 22. Ps. 39 | |

The first thought I had was this, *Perhaps the Holy Spirit is calling this person, Anonymous, Wisconsin, to lead services where he or she is incarcerated!* Think about it! You are in a mission field; who better to relate to others in your "country" than you?! You may someday be called to serve the hurting, right where you are.

Ramona Saatkamp
Greenville, Michigan

BEING LUTHERAN

I wish you wouldn't have shared my quote at all about what being Lutheran means to me [Reformation insert, Oct.] if you weren't going to get the entire thought in there. Here it is again:

"You know, being Lutheran has nothing to do with my salvation. Jesus Christ lived a perfect life in my place, took the punishment for my sins by dying on a cross, took a victory lap through eternal punishment, and he rose again. As if that isn't enough, he is also preparing a place for me and all believers in heaven, where we will live with him in eternal paradise. But maybe it is this understanding of God's promises that is Lutheran. Before Martin Luther, many believed that they had to do something to merit their eternal salvation. It is Martin Luther who risked his life to

fight for God's truths. 'It is by grace you have been saved, through faith. It is a gift of God, not of works, so no one can boast.' At this point in history, being Lutheran offers me the privilege of hearing the Word of God preached and taught in its truth and purity along with the reminder that we are to share that Word of God with others. That's why I am Lutheran and appreciate being a Lutheran."

Shelley Mattes
West Allis, Wisconsin

Almost all of the confessions we used were edited in order to include as many as we could. Shelley's full submission is a good review for us all.—ed.

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*.

NOTE:

Prof. Stephen Geiger's photo [Oct., p. 17] was taken by Worzella Photography.

God with us

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” Isaiah 7:14

Daniel J. Habben

Not so long ago, my wife found a list of names that we had compiled 16 years ago in anticipation of each of our children's births. We wanted their names to mean something, to be just right, since our kids would carry those names for life.

In a few weeks, churches all over the world will remember a far more significant name-choosing: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” Talk about a name packed with meaning. *Immanuel* comes from the Hebrew and means “God with us.” The child Mary would bear was God himself. Isn't that what we celebrate every Christmas—the fact that God chose to pitch his holy tent among sinful humanity?

HELP IS AT HAND

But perhaps God's arrival should be cause for concern. If you came home to find an ambulance parked in your driveway with lights flashing and engine running, you wouldn't say, “Cool! I've always wanted to see an ambulance up close!” Instead, you would race into the house and shout, “What's wrong?! Who's hurt?!” The presence of an ambulance means trouble.

Likewise, when God parked his Son in that Bethlehem crib, it signaled trouble—or at least it should have. Do we really want a *holy* God to be with us? In the bedroom? In the boardroom? In the bar? Do we want him observing our every action and reading our every thought? Such a prospect should dismay us more than someone livestreaming every hidden moment of our life!

But while the presence of an ambulance signals a problem, it also means that help is at hand. So it is with Immanuel. God is with us—not to punish but to



save. The Son of God accomplished our salvation by actually becoming one of us. In the person of Jesus, God has hair and an eye color. He became thirsty and tired. He even died.

**God is with us—not
to punish but to save.**

ONE EYE ON THE CROSS

But why bring up Jesus' death before the ink on his birth announcement has even dried? Why conjure up images of a brutal crucifixion even as we prepare for the joy of Christmas? Because Christians understand that lasting joy and happiness can only come from knowing and believing that all of our sins are forgiven. And that means celebrating Christmas with one eye on the crib and one eye on the cross, where Jesus paid the penalty for our sin.

At this time of year, credit card companies often offer the chance to win all the purchases you make in De-

cember. Wow—wouldn't it be something to win that contest so that you wouldn't have to start the New Year with a huge credit card bill? But here's something better. When Roman soldiers fastened Jesus to the cross, God the Father charged him with all the sins that we have committed and will ever commit. With our sins paid for, the debt we owe God has been erased. The door to everlasting happiness is wide open.

It's no wonder that churches all over the world proclaim this well-known prophecy from Isaiah at this time of year. It's a joy to be reminded that in Jesus we have Immanuel: God with us. In the person of Jesus, God joined Team Humanity so that we undeserving sinners may live forever with Team Divinity.

Whom will you invite to church this Christmas to learn the meaning of Immanuel, God with us?

Contributing editor Daniel Habben is pastor at St. John's, Saint John, Antigua, West Indies.



Mark Schweder

[God] has assured
us that nothing . . .
can overcome the
church, which he
holds in his
gracious hands.

No uncertain future

Sometimes you know exactly what's coming.

In October, the morning frost on the grass, the leaves turning from green to gold and red and then beginning to fall, the squirrels gathering and hiding acorns, geese in V-shaped formations flying south—all of these combine to let you know exactly what's coming. Winter soon will arrive. It's inevitable.

The latest smartphone is announced. The speculation grows about what amazing improvements and features the new version will include. When it's released, you know that millions of people will stand in line to replace their smartphones simply because they want to have the latest and the best.

Before Thanksgiving, the decorations appear in the stores and on the streets. Toy shelves are overflowing with this year's popular new items. A different kind of music plays on the radio. All of the signs and signals are there. The Christmas holiday is approaching. It's inevitable.

Advent (which means "coming" or "arrival") is the season of the church year when we look ahead to the celebration of our Savior's first coming in Bethlehem. The Christian church has set aside the four weeks before Christmas as a time to look ahead to that day when we remember and thank God for the gift of his Son. It's a time of reflection and repentance and a time to remember what that first Christmas means for us and for a world of sinners. We light the candles on the Advent wreath. We open the little doors on the Advent calendar. Our children practice for the special children's Christmas service.

But another event to which Advent points us is sometimes lost in the Advent preparation for Christmas. Yes, Advent reminds us of Jesus' first coming and prepares us to celebrate it. But it also reminds us of Jesus' promise to come again. It points to that

unknown day and hour when we will see our Savior return, coming not in humility as a lowly child but coming in the clouds in all of his victorious glory.

Our Savior has given us signs to let us know that his coming is not in doubt. When hurricanes strike with all their fury, when tornadoes devastate a community, when earthquakes demolish entire cities, when unspeakable evil snuffs out innocent lives, when disease ravages entire populations, when children starve—in each case we are moved to remember Jesus' words: "I am coming soon" (Revelation 3:11). When false teachers lead people from the truth by telling them what their itching ears want to hear, when love grows cold and violence stalks our streets, when the church suffers persecution, when fears of war grip our attention, Jesus reminds us, "These things must happen before I return."

Think about these things this Advent season. When we see those signs, let them remind us to live a life of repentance and faith. Let these things lead us to turn in complete trust to God's promises that his love and protection are always with his people. Remember that he has assured us that nothing—not even the worst attacks of Satan or the power of hell itself—can overcome the church, which he holds in his gracious hands.

And even as the disturbing signs of the end surround us, let them move us to be filled with joyful anticipation for our Savior's return. He has promised us that he will return. He has given us reminders that he will come again. And in the darkest times in this sinful world, he enables us in faith and trust and joy to pray, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus!"

Light for our path

“Why do Christian parents lie to their children about Santa Claus and other mythical figures?”

James F. Pope

I fear your question is going to drive people into two camps: some who agree with you and others who do not appreciate your characterization of them. I aim to address both groups.

FACT BEHIND FICTION

Make-believe characters and fictional personages are commonplace in children's literature. “Once upon a time” often leads to imaginary people like Jack of beanstalk fame, Cinderella, and Little Red Riding Hood. The Christmas season has would-be characters like the Grinch; Frosty the Snowman; Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer; and, of course, Santa Claus.

While the chubby man in the red suit is fictional, there is some factual basis for “Jolly Old Saint Nicholas.” Some three hundred years after Jesus' birth, a baby by the name of Nicholas was born in present-day Turkey. Nicholas grew to become a monk and then a bishop in the Eastern Church. Stories developed about the red-robed bishop who protected children and gave gifts to the poorest of them. After he died on Dec. 6, A.D. 343, people began honoring Nicholas on the anniversary of his death with gift giving.

It appears we can credit Dutch immigrants to the United States for bringing traditions of Sint Nikolaas or Sinterklaas with them. Over time in our country, Sinterklaas morphed into Santa Claus, and the day associated with him changed from Dec. 6 to Dec. 24/25.

So, while the fellow from the North Pole is make-believe, the man from Turkey is real. Children need to learn the difference. So do Christian parents.

THE GIFT ABOVE ALL GIFTS

Where does this leave us with your question? Ideally, Christian parents are teaching their children: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does

not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). Whether it is Christmas, a birthday, or any day gifts are given, Christian parents want to teach their children that God is behind every “good and perfect gift.” Ideally, at Christmas, Christian parents are teaching their children to give thanks to God for his “indescribable gift” (2 Corinthians 9:15)—his gift of a Savior in Bethlehem.

I think you would agree with me that, with or without Santa Claus in the picture, Christian parents can easily distract their children from the real meaning of Christmas. They can lead their children to think that Christmas is all about presents under a tree instead of God's gift in a manger.

Christian parents who teach their children biblical truths and engage in Christmas cultural practices can open themselves up for criticism. I, for one, do not want to judge their motives or characterize them as liars. I do not know how they handle other make-believe characters and fictional personages that fill children's literature. I do not know what kind of playful interactions they have with their children.

A suggestion that might retain a cultural practice and remove distractions from the Christmas celebration is to move the traditions associated with St. Nicholas back to his day on the calendar: Dec. 6. If we separated our gift giving from Christmas, there could be less interference with the celebration of God's “indescribable gift” of grace.

But that's unlikely. Instead, Christian parents will need to keep pointing their children to the Gift above all gifts in December and throughout the year.

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.

Psalms 119:105



What if **GOD** was one of us?

A song leads us to consider our Savior, who became one of us and gave his perfect life as a sacrifice for all sinners.

Timothy J. Westendorf

Some of you reading this are too old or too young to appreciate the reference. But as a guy who listened to pop music in the '90s, the song has always stuck with me. I sometimes find myself singing it 20 years later.

"One Of Us" was written by Eric Bazilian and released by Joan Osborne in 1995. It was the theme song of a television drama called "Joan of Arcadia" about a decade later. The song was nominated for a Grammy in several categories. I find the tune catchy and maybe a bit haunting.

But some of the words have always intrigued me. If I ever talked to Eric Bazilian or Joan Osborne, I might ask them what they had in mind when they wrote and sang:

If God had a name what would
it be?

And would you call it to his face?

If you were faced with Him in all
His glory

What would you ask if you had
just one question?

And yeah, yeah, God is great

Yeah, yeah, God is good

And yeah, yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah

What if God was one of us?

Just a slob like one of us

Just a stranger on the bus

Tryin' to make his way home?

If God had a face what would it
look like?

And would you want to see if,
seeing meant

That you would have to believe
in things like heaven

And in Jesus and the saints,
and all the prophets?

Was this just another song trying to appeal to the masses and make some money? Was it satirical, mocking dearly held Christian beliefs? Was it written out of frustration with what God claims to be and what he often seems to be? Was it a reflection of the embittered heart of a person who's only known a perverted version of Christian teaching? Was it a true searching and longing for a God who is good and great and holy and glorious . . . and yet chooses to be so near and dear to the people of the human race that he knows by experience their pain, trials, loneliness, and weakness?

A LONGING FOR GOD

That last possibility seems to stick out from the rest, doesn't it? It catches our eyes and hits our hearts as something desirable and refreshing. That's not only true if you are a Christian. It is true if you are a human being. There is a longing for a Supreme Being who is so powerful that he is able to help in every situation. So glorious that he is bigger and more worthwhile than the small and fleeting accomplishments of our world. So holy that he has noble standards that revolve around selfless love. So great that he can be boasted of and be held up as better than any challenger. So good that he wants the best for his creatures and acts to carry out that desire. So just that the injustices and unfairness of this world might be fixed and forgotten forever.

And yet, if we are honest, wouldn't all of us be asking ourselves some pretty serious questions about such a Being? What would such a good, great, holy, just, glorious, and powerful Deity want with someone like me? How many times would his power be exercised to hurt me because I have harmed somebody more worthy of his love than I am? What would I have to offer his glorious Majesty with my short life, small accomplishments, and minimal worth? What would someone so holy think of my foul thoughts, whining pettiness, vengeful plans, spiteful words, and lazy work ethic? What would he say about

my level of thankfulness for all the good gifts he has given?

While I need and even want God to be holy and great and powerful and glorious, more than anything else I need him to be kind, compassionate, gracious, forgiving, brotherly, and fatherly. I need one who is holy but does not cast me away because of my sin. I need somebody who is great yet still takes time for insignificant me. I need one who is powerful but is, without a doubt, on my side with that power. I need somebody who is glorious but uses it not to consume and crush me but to console and comfort me.

GOD IS WITH US

The Bible tells us that such a God is not only possible; he is reality. The Scriptures answer that provocative question, "What if God was one of us?" with this utterly astounding, incomprehensible, and awesome response: "He was. He is."

What if God was
one of us? He was.
He is. That is the
marvel, mystery, and
meaning of Christmas.

Matthew's gospel tells of an angel who appeared to a man named Joseph. Joseph's pledged wife, Mary, had become pregnant without his involvement. The angel assured him that this child was like none other, conceived in Mary's womb by God himself. He told Joseph that this was the fulfillment of an ancient promise of God penned by his prophet Isaiah, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us')" (Matthew 1:23).

What if God was one of us? He was. He is. If he had a name what would it be? Jesus, "because he will save his

people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). What if God was just a slob, a stranger? He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected (Isaiah 53). The world did not recognize him, did not receive him, even though he had created it (John 1). If God had a face, what would it look like? It would be a face of compassion, with pure and pitying eyes, truth-speaking lips (Matthew 9:35, 36), and a face set "like flint" to carry his highly important, brutally difficult mission (Isaiah 50:6,7).

He, being the eternal God, would enter human history to take care of the world's long-standing curse of sin and death. He, being divinely holy, would live among sinners yet be without sin and give his perfect life as a sacrifice for a guilty human race. He, the beloved and pleasing Son of God, would allow himself to be forsaken by his Father so that rebels might become his brothers and sisters, dearly loved children of the heavenly Father. He, the everlasting Word, would speak words of good news and good cheer to all nations, but he would choose to reveal them and their power in a gospel message recorded by prophets and apostles that comes to human hearts in word and water, wine and wheat. He, the all-knowing and all-ruling, would serve as the only needed mediator, pointing God and man to his sacrifice that made peace, once for all. He, the Ever-Present, would visibly leave, yet promise to be near to hear and answer his siblings' sighs with the empathy of one who knows the human experience all too well.

What if God was one of us? He was. He is. That is the marvel, mystery, and meaning of Christmas. We no longer need to ask the question because he has answered it once for all in Jesus Christ! Find your Christmas joy and peace in him, the God who is your brother.

Timothy Westendorf is pastor at Abiding Word, Highlands Ranch, Colorado.

ABIDING

truth

One of Luther's favorite things to preach about was Christmas—God made flesh to save us.

Nathaniel J. Biebert

Martin Luther and Christmas were like two peas in a pod. He called Christmas a “great festival,” a “beautiful festival,” a “lovely festival.” He called the Christmas story a “joyful, blessed history,” a “comforting, lovely account.” He composed three original Christmas hymns—*Christian Worship* 33, 38, and 53—including his famous 15-stanza hymn “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.” In fact, Luther and Christmas have become so intertwined in many minds that when “Away in a Manger” was first published in the 1880s, it was falsely claimed that Luther had composed both text and tune for his children.

But what married Martin Luther to Christmas more than anything else was his preaching. Between 1514 and 1544, he preached at least 47 different Christmas sermons on Luke 2:1-20 alone, not to mention the Christmas sermons he preached on Matthew chapter 1, John chapter 1, and Isaiah chapter 9, and the Christmas sermons he prepared only for print. Just between 1527 and 1533, he preached six sermon series on Luke chapter 2, each of them three to five sermons long.

Luther himself tells us how he could do that and why he did: “[The account of Christ’s birth] is a rich history on which there are many sermons to preach” (Weimar Edition of *Luther’s Works* [WA], Vol. 29, p. 679). “By God’s grace we know almost all of this Gospel text quite well; on the other hand, we don’t know it at all. We know it well because we hear it and read it and sing it so often . . . and yet we know nothing. That is why we are moved by it only a little or not at all, and it does not go to our hearts and does not occupy us as it ought.” If we knew it well, we would always “have joy and delight from it” (WA, Vol. 23, p. 726).

Luther almost invariably began his sermons on Luke chapter 2 with “the history.” Jesus’ birth was not merely a cute story. “Notice the certainty in the statement of the evangelist [Luke] that the birth of Christ took place at the time of Emperor Augustus and when Cyrenius was governor of the Roman Empire in Syria” (*Luther’s Works* [LW], Vol. 52, p. 8). All the comfort we derive from the Christmas story is rooted in its historicity. “Is he here for the sake of the geese, cows, or pigs? He is a human. If he had wanted to help the pigs, he would have assumed the nature of a pig. . . . He has put on human nature; he was made the son of a virgin” (WA, Vol. 37, p. 236).

Luther simply could not get over his awe of the miracles of Christmas.

The fact that Mary had to give birth to Jesus in shameful circumstances was proof that Christ’s kingdom is not of this world, that he came to suffer and that those who bear his name must suffer, and that he came for a world of sinful rogues and wretches. The world either thinks little of the account or think that it’s ridiculous, but believers revel in every detail like the angels did.

Luther then moved on to the angel’s message to the shepherds, “the first and best preaching” in the New Testament (WA, Vol. 29, p. 656). Don’t miss it when the angel says that a Savior is born “to you.” “T-O Y-O-U [in Luke 2:11] should be written in large letters” (WA, Vol. 27, p. 493), yes, “in blazing letters” (WA, Vol. 37, p. 236). “For, if it is true that the child was born of the virgin and is mine, then I have no angry God and I must know and feel that there is nothing but laughter and joy in the heart of the Father and no sadness in my heart. For, if what the angel says is true, that he is our Lord and Savior, what can sin

do against us?" (LW, Vol. 51, p. 216). The angel's sermon is also proof that God communicates his grace and works saving faith through the proclamation of the gospel.

When Luther reached the song of the angel host, he divided it into three stanzas:

- 1) "Glory" belongs "to God in the highest," not to our works or merit.
- 2) "Peace on earth" is the result of the Christ Child's birth for those who believe he came to reconcile them with God.
- 3) When humans have this peace, then they also have "good will," which Luther said he would rather translate as "delight" (WA, Vol. 49, p. 291).

From the example of the shepherds, Luther taught that faith in Christ produces good works. And good works are not limited to what is done in a monastery or in an official church-related position (after all, "the shepherds returned" to their flocks).

Luther simply could not get over his awe of the miracles of Christmas. It was miracle enough that God would stoop so far down as to assume human nature in the womb of the virgin. "But, it is even more miraculous that the Son of God . . . does this for the sake of the poor, condemned human race, to deliver them from the curse and the devil's power and to restore them to their proper condition again" (WA, 10/3:432).

Perhaps this is all best summed up in a Christmas hymn that predated the Reformation and seems to have been Luther's favorite. He quoted it at least five times in his Christmas sermons and cited it as proof that the gospel was preserved even in the darkness of the pope's false teaching:

For us today is born a child,
A perfect son so peerless,
Of Mary, fair maid undefiled,
To cheer mankind so cheerless.
Were he not born, we all had dwelled
In fear and fire, from God expelled—
Salvation's ours forever!
To you, sweet Jesus, glory be
For sharing in humanity!
Let hell subdue us never!
(*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* 131:2)

Nathaniel Biebert is pastor at Risen Savior, Austin, Texas.

As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, this is the final article in a 12-part series on our Lutheran heritage.

Want to read more of Luther's Christmas sermons? Check out Biebert's recently published English translation of Luther's Christmas sermons on Isaiah 9:6. A review of this book is on p. 21.

LUTHER

still speaks

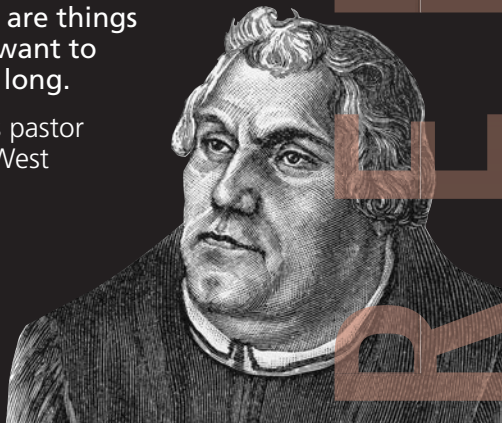
In his book on the bondage of the will, Luther wrote, "What matter of more sacred importance can lie hidden in Scriptures now that the seals are broken, the stone is rolled from the sepulcher, and that greatest of all mysteries is brought to light: Christ, the Son of God made Man—God Triune and yet One, Christ, who suffered for us and will rule eternally? Are not these things known and sung in our very streets? Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what else will you find in them?" (*What Luther Says*, Vol. 1, #437).

"Keep Christ in Christmas," urged the sign on the front lawn. Luther would agree, and so do we. At the center of our salvation lies the glorious teaching of God becoming man to save us. That little baby clothed in the diapers of poverty is a miracle of love.

Maybe we should also have yard signs that read, "Keep Christ after Christmas." The Bethlehem crib is only part of the story of our salvation. If the account were to end there, Jesus' birth would still be a miracle, but worth nothing to us. That diapered holy child asleep on the hay must lead to the sin-laden man on the cross for whose seamless robe calloused soldiers cast their dice. Nor dare it end on that skull-shaped Good Friday knoll. An emptied, borrowed Easter tomb and a "mission accomplished" Ascension complete the story of redemption.

Of course, we want to keep the Savior's birth at the heart of our Christmas joy. But we surely don't want to stop there. "Christ, the Son of God made Man . . . Christ, who suffered for us and will rule eternally" are things we know and will want to sing about all year long.

Richard Lauersdorf is pastor at Good Shepherd, West Bend, Wisconsin.



After growing up thinking God seeks to punish believers, a woman finds solace in forgiveness through Jesus.

Rachel Hartman

Juana Medina was born south of the border, in the central city of León, Mexico. She grew up in a strong Catholic family. “We were Catholics—we had always been Catholics,” she recalls. “We always went to church.”

Catholicism is predominant in Mexico. Other religions, when Medina was growing up, were few and far between. “I only knew there were two types of religious people: Catholics and Protestants,” she notes. “As for Protestants—well, my family didn’t even go close to homes where they knew Protestants lived.”

BELIEFS IN MEXICO

“Mexican Catholicism is more closely related to Catholicism at the time of Luther than it is to American Catholicism today,” explains Mike Hartman, a missionary who serves in Latin America. “The idea that God is stern and wants to punish you is at the heart of it.”

This is one of the main reasons typically given in Mexican Catholicism for approaching Mary, adds Hartman. “Mothers are kind and gracious. Fathers are stern and macho. They often say, ‘If you want something, you ask Mom, not Dad.’”

Throughout Latin America, the thread of Catholicism runs prevalent in the culture. This means other religions or beliefs are often shunned. To explain this phenomenon, Juan Ricardo Díaz, a WELS member who works for Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services, wrote a book titled *Soy Católico, no Cristiano* (I am Catholic, not Christian).

“A typical Catholic in central Mexico will be insulted if you call them a Christian,” notes Hartman.

A DEBILITATING ILLNESS

When Medina got married, she continued to live in León and attend the Catholic church. She and her husband started a family and got together regularly with relatives in the area, who were also Catholic.

As her children grew, however, Medina became ill. Her conditions worsened, and doctors couldn’t find a cure. “All of my bones hurt,” she says. “I couldn’t move anything except my mouth. I was a complete invalid.”

For three years, family members took her to doctor after doctor, without finding a cure. “Some doctors thought I had problems with my kidneys or liver, but I wasn’t convinced. I had different aches and pains each day,” Medina’s disease continued at a debilitating rate. It got to the point where she no longer wanted to live. “Doctors would prescribe medicine and I refused to take it. I just wanted to die,” she says.

Her mother encouraged her to seek treatment elsewhere. One of Medina’s

brothers lived in California, and the family sent her there to get help. “I thought they were all tired of dealing with me and just wanted me out of their lives,” she recalls. “I figured I would head there and die.” Weak and sick, Medina arrived at her brother’s home in California. Shortly after, she was admitted to a nearby hospital.

Medina remained in the hospital for three months. When she was released, she felt only somewhat better. “I did recover but never regained full health,” she notes. “No one determined what I had. In hindsight, though, I know part of it was depression.”

After she was released from the hospital, Medina’s husband, Marcelo, decided to come to California and join her. He brought their children, as well as a sister and her baby. All of them stayed with relatives for a time. Then Medina received a housing option through the government, and the family moved there.

DISCOVERING OTHER RELIGIONS

During her stay at the hospital, one of the nurses told Medina of a place to go for help. While the doctors couldn’t identify what exactly was wrong with her body, the nurse suggested a spot that could provide some aid. “It sounded like an odd place—I was sure it was full of witches,” recalls Medina.

Desperate for answers, when she left the hospital Medina went to the address with her sister. “It was a Chris-

Confessions OF FAITH



tian church, which I hadn't understood before I got there. I liked it, and it was there that I started learning Jesus loves me just how I am," she says. Medina attended the church for a while, but she also grew involved in a nearby Catholic church.

A MOVE AWAY FROM VIOLENCE

The family settled in to live in California. Medina and her husband had four daughters and four sons. The neighborhood they lived in was a rough and dangerous place, full of gangs and frequent fights. "When my oldest daughter was about to turn 15 years old, we started planning her party," remembers Medina. In Mexico, families often hold a *quinceañera*, or special party, for a daughter's 15th birthday. The daughter usually wears a formal dress, is accompanied by attendants, and receives a service and celebration in her honor.

Medina's daughter never attended the party. "Two months before the big day, she was murdered," explains Medina. The event sent shock waves through the family. Medina and her husband worried that when the other children grew older, they would get involved in the neighborhood's violent atmosphere—or worse, try to carry out revenge on their sister's murderer.

The family looked for a new, quieter place to live. After sorting through the options, they decided to move to Edna, Texas. There they found a calm atmosphere and lifestyle. After settling in, Medina noticed a Lutheran

church was offering English classes. She signed up and started attending the courses. Bible classes were offered as well. "I started going to Bible study there, but I was still active in the Catholic church," recalls Medina.

CLINGING TO THE BIBLE

After attending Bible studies for several months, Medina grew to appreciate the detailed teachings of the Bible. "I started realizing that God doesn't hold my sins against me. Before I was always living in sin and tormented by my bad deeds," she says. Later the congregation started offering Spanish services. "When the pastor told me they were going to start having worship in Spanish, I said it probably wouldn't work too well and that not many people would come," she remembers.

Worried about low attendance, Medina called her family and relatives in the area and encouraged them to go. "I told them to go so that at least some people would be there," she says. Marcelo agreed hesitantly to go to the service. On the way home from Spanish worship, he said to Juana, "It can't be that easy. We must have to do something. God can't just forgive our sins like that."

Juana explained to her husband what she had learned from the Bible and that God really does wash all sin away. Juana and Marcelo took classes to become members and were then confirmed.



Juana Medina (left) and her daughter Rosa with Andrew Schroer, pastor at Redeemer, Edna, Texas.

Now both are active and involved in the church. "Whenever something comes up in which I can help, I always do," notes Medina. "My husband is a painter and fixes things around the church and property."

She also continually looks for ways to invite her children and family members to attend a church where full peace is offered through Jesus. "Before I always had an image of a God who wanted to punish me," she says. "At the Lutheran church I learned about his love."

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

Learn more about outreach to Hispanics in the United States on p. 28.



heart to heart
parent conversations

This month's topic gets at the heart of one of our fundamental jobs as Christian parents—helping cultivate a mission heart in our children. Of course, that is more likely to happen if we as parents display our mission hearts. I'm the first to admit that my mission heart can go missing for days—or even weeks—in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Reading an article like this helps me refocus. It's a great message to hear any time of year, but I think that it's especially timely at Christmas. It's a natural time to share our faith in Jesus, the true "reason for the season." May God bless our efforts!

Nicole Balza

**Join the
conversation!**

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

HOW CAN WE HELP CULTIVATE A MISSION HEART IN CHILDREN?

These are my five ways to cultivate a mission heart in children.

1 Build awareness: When I was a young child (think three years old), I thought that everyone knew and believed in Jesus. As I grew older, the reality that a kind neighbor, relative, or friend in my small world didn't believe was heart boggling. What did that mean for them?

When children learn that not everyone believes in Jesus, they can feel sad. We have the opportunity to build them up. We know Jesus and the comfort that God our Savior "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people" (1 Timothy 2:4-6).

That knowledge comes with an opportunity. God gives us—young and old—the privilege to share the good news about Jesus' love and forgiveness. Romans 10:13,14 says, " 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"

It is such a joy to witness children sharing their faith! They talk about Jesus with their neighbor, the hurt child at the playground, or even the cashier at the store. When children learn that they carry the powerful good news of Jesus' love and forgiveness with them, it is hard for them to keep it to themselves.

2 Be an example: Children imitate what they see more than what they are told. As we consider how to cultivate a mission heart in young ones, we first need to discern our own heart.

- Do we hold Jesus as our own greatest treasure?
- Do we view lives from an earthly perspective or an eternal one?
- Do we believe ourselves to be disciples of Christ in whatever job or role we have?
- Are we willing to make personal sacrifices (time, comfort, materials) for the good of others?
- Do we treat and speak about others who are different from us with compassion and respect?

When I was a young teen, my dad asked me to accompany him on his guitar for the new Spanish worship services at our church. At the time, I did not want to share my time or talents, but out of reluctant obedience I agreed. God certainly reached more than the Spanish-speaking believers who walked through the door. He changed my heart as I watched families strengthened in their faith with others in worship and got to know them personally.

Now I greatly treasure that experience. My dad not only encouraged me to serve others but also took me by the hand and led me by his example. He still does. Thank you, Dad!

As 1 Corinthians 11:1 tells us, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”

3 Use resources: There are many different tools that can cultivate a mission heart in children:

- Read and talk about God’s Word. This is where children learn their own need for a Savior and see that the entire Bible points to Jesus as their risen hero who has won eternal life by grace for them. Through the Word, the Spirit strengthens their faith, knowledge, and heart to share the gospel.
- Learn about past missionaries, persecuted Christians, and martyrs throughout history from books, magazines, videos, and audio books. You can start with Jesus (of course!), the disciples, Saul/Paul, Polycarp, Jan Hus, and Martin Luther.
- Pray for missionaries and persecuted Christians who are alive today. We have missionaries in East Asia, South Asia, and other places. Their work is often difficult. Make a list of their names, print off their pictures as reminders, and bless them as a family. Consult the World Mission office of our synod for assistance (414-256-3234 or bwm@wels.net). Children can be pen pals with mission children from a different country or in orphanages. The opportunities to serve others in your own community and abroad are many. Your family can help stuff meal bags or help pick out food for the hungry when you go grocery shopping. They can even share hope with a child whose parents are in prison.
- Play! Use your imagination and learn. One game we play with our kids is “Pin the Missionary.” Give a globe a spin and when the child places his finger on a random location, look where he has been sent. Did he land in Brazil? Pakistan? America? Look up information about the place he “landed” and see how many Christians live there and what the climate is like. Learn the different kinds of food the people eat and what the most common jobs are. If you only have a map, you can tape it to the wall, blindfold and spin the child, and have her place a marker on a map. Still fun!

4 Take a trip: Consider taking your family on a mission trip. Often when family vacations are planned, they are purposed to serve ourselves with entertainment and rest. There is nothing wrong with taking a family vacation. But consider how your family can grow closer to each other and closer to God when your vacation has a greater purpose than yourselves.

When I think back to family vacations, I remember a variety

of bad attitudes that would creep up—entitlement, bickering over small issues, and discontentment. Serving others can cause little ones to see the needs of others as well as their own. What if we considered taking our time—yes, even our vacation time—and using it to serve others and our Lord?

5 Serve at home: You don’t have to travel far to be a missionary! Look in your backyard, your community, or elsewhere in your state and discuss with your children ways that you can reach others with the gospel in words and action. Matthew 5:14-16 says, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Often Christians are criticized when it comes to helping others in need because we’d rather send a check than get our hands dirty. But you can go out and be a testimony of Jesus’ love by how you treat others.

Who are the weak, poor, or neglected in your community? Is there an elderly neighbor who could use help with lawn care? Is there a population of homeless that can be intentionally served by your family? Are there any recent immigrants that could use a helping hand? Is there a women’s shelter in need of donations? Include your children! They may complain at first, but they will see how God can use not just their money but also their time to bless others.

Your home is an excellent place to welcome and serve others with hospitality. These opportunities can be big or small—invite a new guest at your church over for dinner, hold a Bible study, host an international student, allow a family member in need to live with you, plan a play date for the young families on your block, or (on a grander scale) have a block party for the neighbors. You’ll find out that they are just as weird and uniquely made as you. Food brings people together!

Let’s give others *true food* that never leaves them empty: “‘For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘always give us this bread.’ Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’ ” (John 6:33-35).

Jesus brings believers together eternally.

Amanda Rose and her husband, Frank, have four young children and live in Kingston, Wisconsin.

This article is reprinted with permission from holyyhenhouse.com, a blog with “chatter that matters” for women of all ages.





teentalk

Thankfulness

Sometimes our “thank yous” are only useless words. We can become more thankful by practicing true thankfulness.

Lukas Heckmann

Today many of us live in a world of many blessings. God has blessed us with education, family, friends, and faith. But how are we doing at thanking him?

I don't mean just saying thank you, because we say thank you a lot. Think about Christmas. We receive gifts from family, friends, and coworkers. Many of the gifts we receive are things we've wanted and feel we need, but sometimes we receive a gift that we feel we don't need and don't have a use for. When I get a gift like that, I say thank you, but only because I don't want people to feel I'm ungrateful.

Is that how we treat God's gift of Jesus? Do we thank God because it's the nice thing to do? I know I do that a lot. During church, I frequently thank God for his blessings, but during the week I find myself doing the opposite of what he told me in church. That is one of my useless “thank yous” to God. If we thank God like we thank the relative who gave us the gift we'll never use, then God does not want our thanks.

In the book of Malachi, the people of Israel were giving useless offerings or

thanks to God. They, like us, said thanks to God only because it was a tradition. Here is how God responded. “‘Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,’ says the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will accept no offering from your hands’” (1:10).

So how do we become better at thanking God? How do we live our lives out of thanks to God? Like everything else, it takes practice. A golfer doesn't become a better putter by running eight miles every day, and a basketball player doesn't become a better three-point shooter by swimming laps in the pool. These things might indirectly improve their skills, but would not directly impact them.

If you want to become a better three-point shooter, the key is repetition. Shoot a hundred threes with perfect form. The same thing goes for giving thanks to God. If you want to give God the thanks he deserves, practice—and repeat it every day. We are encouraged to “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

It is not that hard to find God's blessings in your life if you take a minute to look. If you're reading this article, you woke up in the morning. Thank God for something as simple as that. The past two years I have had the privilege to participate in an eight-miles-for-water walk, which replicates what people in Africa need to do just to get a drink of water. It involves carrying 70 pounds of water from a spring two miles away, twice a day. So the next time you walk to the faucet to pour a glass of water, thank God because even something that small is a blessing from God. Thank your parents when food gets put on the table because your parents and the food on the table are huge blessings from God.

Finally, thank God for the gift of Jesus. Let that gift help you see all the other blessings God has freely given to you. Give thanks.

Lukas Heckmann, a junior at Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, Wisconsin, is a member at St. Andrew, Middleton, Wisconsin.

CHANGES IN MINISTRY

Pastors

Barthel, Thomas, to Rock of Ages, Payson, Ariz.
Bauer, Andrew, to First, Elkhorn, Wis.
Blaho, David, to Ascension, Crossville, Tenn.
Denney, Timothy, to Shepherd of the Hills, Duluth, Minn.
Goelzer, Christopher, to Good Shepherd, Deltona, Fla.
Hintz, Michael, to retirement
Hoff, Lance, to Immanuel, Watertown/St. Mark, Richwood, Wis.
Jacobs, Troy, to Abiding Word, Maineville, Ohio
Johannes, Robert, to retirement
Kimmel, Matthew, to St. Luke, New Lisbon, Wis.
Kolberg, Kenneth, to retirement
Rath, James, to retirement
Sahlstrom, Gregory, to Beautiful Savior, West Des Moines, Iowa.
Schmeling, Steve, to Pilgrim, Minneapolis, Minn.
Stelljes, John, to Mount Olive, Shakopee, Minn.
Stone, Scott, to retirement
Wenzel, Kenneth, to retirement

Teacher

Bohl, Erin, to Cornerstone Early Learning Center, Hugo, Minn.

Staff minister

Boggs, James, to St. John, Lannon, Wis.

NOTICE FOR CONGREGATION TREASURERS AND PASTORS

We thank God for you and for your support of the ministry WELS carries out on behalf of all congregations. We ask that you continue to mail your Congregation Mission Offering (CMO) deposit and its processing coupon to our bank 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. 8, 2018, will be credited as 2017 CMO, if accompanied by a 2017 coupon. Thank you for your assistance

COMING EVENTS

Live nativity—Dec. 1–2, 6–8 P.M. Christ, Eagle River, Wis. Presentations run every 20 minutes. 715-479-8307.

Live nativity—Dec. 1–2, 5–8 P.M. Trinity, Marinette, Wis. Presentations run every 20 minutes outdoors; refreshments and entertainment in school gym. Website,

trinitymarinette.com, 715-732-9868.

Living nativity—Dec. 1, 5–8 P.M.; Dec. 2, 3–7 P.M. St. Luke's, Watertown, Wis. 920-390-0188.

Bethlehem Express—Dec. 2, 11 A.M.–2:30 P.M. St. Paul's, Arlington, Minn. Website, stpaularlington.com.

Live nativity—Dec. 3, 4–7 P.M. Martin Luther, Oshkosh, Wis. Presented in "drive-through" fashion. Website, martinlutheroshkosh.com/events/live-nativity.

WELS ministerial education school Christmas concerts—

- Dec. 2, 7:30 P.M.; Dec. 3, 4 P.M. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. 507-354-8221.
- Dec. 10, 3 and 7 P.M. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. 262-242-8100.
- Dec. 17, 3 P.M.; Dec. 21, 10 A.M. Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis. 920-261-4352.
- Dec. 22, 7 P.M. Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich. 989-793-1041.

Mid-term graduation—Dec. 14, 10 A.M. Chapel of the Christ, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. 507-354-8221.

WELS Day at Ford Field—Dec. 16, 4:30 P.M. Ford Field, Detroit, Mich. Detroit Lions vs. Chicago Bears. Lucas Schroeder, 313-262-2164; lucas.schroeder@lions.nfl.net. Tickets, detroitlions.com/wels.

Certification courses—offered online through Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. Courses available in the spring 2018 semester toward a chaplain or evangelism certificate. Registration deadline, Dec. 22. Website, mlc-wels.edu/continuing-education.

Young adult conference—Alive and Awake. Jan. 5–6, 2018. Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, Wis. Website, awakealive.com.

Association of WELS Chaplains conference—Feb. 2, 2018. Schoenstatt Conference Center, Waukesha, Wis. Website, wels.net/event/the-association-of-wels-chaplains-conference-save-the-date.

Men's retreat—Feb. 24, 2018. Ninth annual Men of His Word conference. Oshkosh Convention Center, Oshkosh, Wis. Theme: "Get out of the boat." Website, menofhisword.org.

Women's retreat—Mar. 9–11, 2018. Christian Women Today. Sheraton Brookfield Hotel, Brookfield, Wis. Theme: "Give thanks in all circumstances." 414-507-5341. Website, christianwomantoday.org.

Women's retreat—Mar. 9–11, 2018. Pathways to Christ. Oshkosh, Wis. Theme: "Speak O Lord." 920-233-1069. Website, pathwaystochrist.org.

Men's retreat—Mar. 24, 2018. Fifth annual Ironmen of God conference. St. Paul's, Ixonia, Wis. Website, ironmenofgodwi.org.

NAMES WANTED

Boston, Mass.—WELS members or people living in the area. New outreach. David Meyer, revdmeyer@gmail.com; 508-761-5051.

College students—Register with WELS Campus Ministry for free helpful materials, including *Forward in Christ* magazine and *Meditations*. Website, wels.net/campus-ministry.

Monroe, Wis.—WELS members or people living in the area. Nathan Strutz, 608-515-4334; pastorstrutz@rlcverona.com.

Military/inmates/individuals with special needs—Special Ministries supplies devotions, resources, and other spiritual help and teaching tools to members of the Armed Forces, inmates, and individuals with special needs. Complete an online referral form at wels.net/refer. Special Ministries, 414-256-3241; csm@wels.net.

WELS ARCHIVES

The synod archives is looking for the following materials for donation: church histories; bulletins (from anniversary, installations, dedications, and other special events); church constitutions, bylaws, and other charter documents; Book of Sacred Acts; photographs, scrapbooks, and other visuals of your congregation's history; and more. For more information about materials to donate, call 414-256-3203. Website, wels.net/archives.

To schedule a tour of the WELS archives and visitors center, contact CMMtours@wels.net, 414-256-3200. Tours are available Monday through Friday during normal business hours.

MONTHLY MINISTRY MEDIA KIT

Each month WELS Communication Services provides images, PowerPoint slides, and reprintable bulletin blurbs to help share information about WELS ministry work with your congregation or school. Access information at cs.welsrc.net/ministry-media-kit.

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Moments with MISSIONARIES

DENVER, COLORADO

Paul Biedenbender



COLORADO

Christ Lutheran Church is a home mission near downtown Denver, Colorado, that reflects the diversity of the area. Paul Biedenbender, pastor at Christ, says that of its 200 souls, 10 percent are African American, 40 percent are Anglo, and 50 percent are Hispanic. The mission offers weekly Sunday services in both English and Spanish. Here Biedenbender discusses the cultural significance of grandmothers and their unique witness in his congregation.

THE VOICE OF A GRANDMOTHER

"I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (2 Timothy 1:5).

The voice of a grandmother is unique. It tends to contain the proper measure of wisdom gained through experience, unconditional love, and uninhibited truth (whether we like it or not). In our diverse community, the voice of the grandmother is also very influential. When grandma/*abuela* speaks, you pay attention. Our congregation is blessed with several grandmothers who are grounded in God's grace and using their voices to point the next generation to the Savior.

Recently we laid to rest one of those unique voices. After blessing Lorene Dickey with 84 years of life, the Lord fulfilled his promise to her in Jesus, crowning her with the glory of heaven. She will be greatly missed, not only as one of the founding members of



Brenda Mosley (second from right) and her grandchildren and great-grandchildren on their baptism day.

our mission but also as one of the most encouraging and endearing personalities. Better known as "Grandma," "Great Grandma-ma," "Granny," and "La Grandma," she always had a warm hug for everyone, from the person attending church for the first time to each of her fellow members who have been on the receiving end for years. Her speech was filled with words of praise to God, confidence in his plans, and reassurance of his promises. God used her to touch the lives of alcoholics, new Christians, young mothers, and a rookie pastor, among so many others.

Three days after the funeral, we celebrated God pouring out his grace in Christ through the baptisms of Davashunique, Ke'arre, Za'Marii, and Ry'Lynn. They are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of our member, Brenda Mosley. Two months earlier, Brenda handed me a slip of paper with her daughter's name and number and the instructions, "Give her a call and set up a time to meet with her." I found out later that she had given a similar mandate to her daughter: "Pastor Paul is going to call you. Answer the phone and let him come over." The Lord blessed those encounters. Brenda was beaming with joy that Sunday morning of the baptisms, praising God for his grace on her family. I'm sure Brenda is going to keep in their ears about Sunday school and Bible information class.

And then it happened again. The phone rang, and I didn't recognize the number or the voice on the other end. "Hi Pastor. This is Alexandra Navarro. My *abuela*, Aurelia Chavez, gave me your number. I'd like to talk to you about church and Baptism." We met a few days later at Aurelia's house, and I was able to share the message of sin and grace. Soon her children Xzadian and Yasmine were also covered in God's baptismal grace.

May the Lord continue to bless the voices of faithful, Christian grandmothers!

Paul Biedenbender serves as a home missionary at Christ, Denver, Colorado.



Booknook

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

In this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Pastor Nathaniel Biebert brings us *Luther at the Manger*, in which he translates the five Christmas sermons Martin Luther preached between Christmas Eve and Dec. 27, 1531. Luther preached on Isaiah 9:6, which from the German translates: "For to us a child is born, a son is given to us, whose government is upon his shoulders, and he is called Wonderful, Counselor, Strength, Champion, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Luther begins his Christmas sermons in amazement that God gave the baby at the manger "to us." Jesus is for you, and so is his salvation. Luther contrasts what the world considers humble with what God considers wonderful. Luther leads his congregation to marvel at the Everlasting Father through whom we are no longer under the law but have the full rights as sons to everlasting life through Jesus.

Sitting at Luther's pulpit, you gain insights into his keen intellect; his down-to-earth manner of speaking; and



Price: \$11.99

most important, his clear expression of the gospel. In the foreword, Pastor Biebert places these sermons in their historical context. This is valuable since Luther's time was different from ours, but the message of Isaiah 9:6 applies to both. Having this historical context aids your ability to fully enjoy and benefit from his message.

The book offers a guide that you can use to read the sermons devotionally over 24 days in Advent, through the 12 days of Christmas up to Epiphany, or on the same days Luther preached them.

Luther at the Manger is an excellent resource for Reformation historians, pastors studying Luther's preaching on Isaiah 9:6, laypeople seeking a devotional study for Christmas, and anyone who wishes to sit with Luther in amazement at the manger and to rejoice in the incarnation.

Brian Heinritz
Henderson, Nevada

Two communities, one church

It was a sunny, early 2016 December Saturday when the phone rang at St. Paul, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. The voice on the other end identified himself as Jacob Luk. He said that he and his community were members of another Lutheran church in town, and he wanted to come to my office and talk about church. *Intriguing and a bit mysterious*, I thought to myself. We set an appointment to meet.

Jacob appeared at my office right on time, along with his wife, Elizabeth. He explained that his South Sudanese community was of the Nuer tribe and that they had been members at a Lutheran Church—Canada congregation for about five years. Once a month they held a Nuer prayer service. They were looking for a new church home because the pastor would not preach his Sunday morning sermon at their

Nuer service, and since the church fellowship hall was being rented out to a private daycare facility, there was no place to have Sunday school. He asked if they could use our facility for a Nuer Christmas Day service followed by a Christmas meal.

And so our relationship began. With approval by St. Paul's council, the Nuer service was held Christmas Day afternoon. I preached my Christmas morning message. The service ran from 2 P.M. until 4:45 P.M. The Christmas meal took

place from 5 P.M. to 7:30 P.M. About 65 Nuer souls attended.

Starting in February 2017, I led a nucleus group through Bible instruction. All 34 souls chose to join our congregation. On Sept. 10, 21 of the 34 were present to be publicly accepted into membership by profession of faith.

A monthly Nuer service now is taking place. Nuer members also attend St. Paul's weekly Sunday services. Our combined kindergarten Sunday school is so large that we had to split it into two classes. Our parking challenge has moved us to negotiate with the University of Ottawa to obtain more off-street parking. The Nuer community has been a gracious and blessed addition to the St. Paul family.

As Jacob likes to explain it, "Two communities, one church."

Harland H. Goetzinger



In September, members of the South Sudanese Nuer tribe became members of St. Paul, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

Serving pure grace in grace-starved Latin America

Just like the shepherds couldn't stop themselves from sharing the good news of their Savior's birth, Jackson, a new Lutheran living in Venezuela, can't keep the peace he found in the gospel to himself.

"You fill them up with the gospel and its hope and peace and comfort, and it starts to spill out," says Missionary Mike Hartman, field coordinator for Latin America. "[Jackson] is inviting people into his home to worship."

What's amazing is that less than a year ago, Jackson didn't have that peace. Living in a country that economically and socially is falling apart—and where there aren't any churches that faithfully share God's true Word—Jackson was looking for hope. He saw a Facebook post from *Academia Cristo* that shared the gospel message and invited him to join a Whatsapp (texting) group that discusses a daily devotion. As he learned more, Jackson began peppering the group leader Henry Herrera, pastor at Most Holy Trinity, Medellín, Colombia (a sister church to WELS), with questions. Herrera invited Jackson to take an online class that he was leading through *Academia Cristo*. Jackson joined all Herrera's classes, went through Bible information class, worshiped online with Most Holy Trinity, and was confirmed within months.

But that wasn't enough for Jackson. He began inviting people into his home in Venezuela and teaching them what he had learned. He also started offering weekly worship, using the website *Iglesia Luterana Cristo* for his worship resources. Just this past summer, he visited people he knew in five different Venezuelan cities and invited them to learn about Jesus and start churches in their communities.

Jackson is just one example of the people *Academia Cristo* is reaching. Since its launch almost three years ago, *Academia Cristo* has reached Spanish-speaking people in every Spanish-speaking country with the

life-saving message of Jesus. And some of those people, people like Jackson, are sharing that message with others.

According to Hartman, the goal of this joint effort between World Missions' One Latin America team and Multi-Language Publications is to "help empower Spanish speakers to know Jesus, to share Jesus, and to go with Jesus."



Top: Jackson and Yuri discovered pure grace through *Academia Cristo*. Middle: A church now meets in their home in Venezuela. Bottom: Jackson also meets with friends in other cities and teaches them about Jesus so they can start churches in their communities.

The field is ripe. Hartman says that very few people in Latin America know the basic gospel message, and very few churches teach it. "People are looking for peace because there isn't peace. There isn't peace in their consciences either," he says. "We serve pure grace in grace-starved Latin America."

The use of Facebook helps spread the word about the ministry. With more than 800,000 followers and a reach between 1 to 2 million people a week, the *Academia Cristo* Facebook page shares daily messages of grace and directs people to the website, academiacristo.com. There people can download free video Bible classes and resources to learn more about their Savior.

Those who want to dig deeper can register for *Academia Cristo's* training program. Currently more than 150 people are active in this program. It starts with the *Heme Aqui* (Here I Am) five-week live online course, which teaches the essential truths of God's Word and how to share them. The class' final project has students videotaping themselves sharing a Bible story with someone else.

The final stage is another set of courses, *En Vivo* (Live), which works through the Old and New Testaments and Luther's Catechism, again with an emphasis on how to teach law/gospel truths to others. Participants are connected with a missionary or national pastor who will mentor them and help them plant churches in their communities. House churches have already opened in Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela.

"It's disciples who are discipling disciples," says Hartman.



Know Spanish speakers who want to learn more about Jesus? Direct them to academiacristo.com. Learn more about WELS Multi-Language Publications at wels.net/mlp. Read about outreach opportunities in the United States on p. 28.

Obituaries

Susan L. Sprengeler, 1948–2017

Susan Sprengeler (née Rose) was born June 9, 1948, in Menomonee Falls, Wis. She died May 14, 2017, in Las Vegas, Nev.

A 1970 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she served Gloria Dei, Belmont, Calif., and Apostles, San Jose, Calif.

She is survived by her husband, Mark; one daughter; two sons; five grandchildren; three brothers; and one sister.

Martha B. Merten, 1928–2017

Martha Merten (née Duncan) was born Nov. 2, 1928, in Ohio. She died July 9, 2017, in Waukesha, Wis.

She served Trinity, Waukesha, Wis.

She is survived by 1 daughter, 4 sons, 10 grandchildren, 15 great-grandchildren, and 1 sister. She is preceded in death by her husband, William, and one great-grandchild.

Lori A. Seiltz, 1962–2017

Lori Seiltz (née Naatz) was born April 28, 1962, in Tacoma, Wash. She died July 25, 2017, in Colorado Springs, Colo.

A 1984 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she served Morrison Zion, Greenleaf, Wis.; Our Savior, Grafton, Wis.; and Salem, Colorado Springs, Colo.

She is survived by her husband, James; four daughters; and two sons.

Joann B. Albrecht, 1949–2017

Joann Albrecht (née Abraham) was born Nov. 3, 1949, in Fond du Lac, Wis. She died Aug. 2, 2017, in Van Dyne, Wis.

A 1971 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she served Wisconsin Lutheran School, Racine, Wis.; Redeemer, Fond du Lac, Wis.; and Faith, Fond du Lac, Wis.

She is survived by her husband, Robert; one son; one daughter; five grandchildren; six sisters; and two brothers.

Let your light shine

In the spirit of Matthew 5:16, we're sharing examples of people who live their faith.

Don Steinhorst, a member of St. John's, Fox Lake, had never been out of the state of Wisconsin. But after watching the "Answers in Genesis" series for years, he was compelled to visit the Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Ky.

Steinhorst saw all the riches that God provided him and wanted to share his experience with others. Having no children of his own, he offered to pay for any of the children in his congregation, ranging from nine years old to eighth grade, to join him on his journey to the life-sized replica of Noah's ark.

"The Bible says store up your treasures in heaven, so I store them in the right direction," Steinhorst says. "You can't take your wealth with you."

A total of 52 children and adults signed up to make the bus trip. Donna Schmitz, the kindergarten teacher at St. John's, helped Steinhorst plan the itinerary. On their way to the Ark Encounter, the group went to the Newark aquarium and the Creation Museum, learning more about the wonders of God's creation.

In the Ark Encounter, they explored the three decks, which depict the biblical history of Noah. The 510-foot-

long structure features exhibits about the ark and animals in the ark. The congregation then had the unique opportunity to spend the night in the ark.

One sixth-grade boy on the trip says, "I was amazed at the size. We always think big, but it is huge."

Steinhorst says his favorite part of the trip was seeing how excited the kids were.

Before heading back to Wisconsin, the group visited the Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Although the bus ride was long, members of the congregation took this opportunity to grow in fellowship. "I knew I'd have fun on this trip, but I had way more fun than I thought I would," says one seventh-grade boy. "Besides just seeing all of the places, it was fun to be with so many of my friends and grown-ups from church. I loved the bus ride."

After returning home, the children wrote a special thank-you card to Steinhorst.

"I never could have done this without Mr. Steinhorst giving us this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," says an eighth-grade girl. "It was a true gift."

Gabriella Moline



Members of St. John, Fox Lake, Wis., took a bus trip to the Ark Encounter in Kentucky and several other sites, thanks to a generous gift from a member who wanted to share this experience with children in the congregation.

WELS news briefs

Adult Discipleship

cad@wels.net

Daniel Habben, pastor at St. John, St. John's, Antigua, will lead the next **interactive faith Bible study** starting in January. Entitled "Isaiah: God confronts and comforts his people," the study will cover the first 12 chapters of Isaiah. The study will be streamed Wednesdays at 6 and 8 P.M. CT, from Jan. 10–Feb. 7, 2018. Learn more at wels.net/interactivefaith.

Special Ministries

414-256-3241; specialministries@wels.net

The Care Committee for Called Workers (CCCW) exists to assist WELS calling bodies in the spiritual, physical, intellectual, and emotional care of their called workers. Recently the committee published **resources for congregations to help their called workers plan for retirement**. Kurt Holzhueter, chairman of the committee, says the committee's goals for called worker retirement planning is to help called workers gain financial literacy; to urge them to start a retirement account; and to encourage calling bodies to take an active role in the planning, perhaps even offering a financial incentive to jumpstart the process. Care Committee materials can be found at welsrc.net/cccw.

WELS Christian Aid and Relief

262-334-7881; revrhein@gmail.com

WELS Christian Aid and Relief has granted almost \$20,500 to our work in South Asia to **provide relief after catastrophic flooding** in August and September. Funds will be used to purchase and deliver supplies like mattresses, blankets, and mosquito netting to people in affected areas. Our contact says providing this help gives us the opportunity to show Christ's love in action to the different communities. Pictured is a home in the flooded area; the high-water line can be seen on the wall of the home behind the mother and daughter. Learn more about Christian Aid and Relief at wels.net/relief.



Communication Services

414-256-3210; csc@wels.net

A version of the Martin Luther film *A Return to Grace: Luther's Life and Legacy* will stream on Netflix beginning in January 2018. The filmmakers have worked with Netflix to localize the production by adding subtitles and foreign language dubbing to ensure maximum viewership. Netflix has more than 110 million subscribers in 190 countries. "The Lord has richly blessed this film project," says Lee Hitter, director of communications. "The Luther film has been seen by hundreds of thousands of people, with more than 1,000 screenings at local theaters, a national audience in a PBS showing that doubled its normal viewership, Marcus Corporation agreeing to show the film to a general audience in theaters it owns in eight states, and now a two-year run on Netflix."

World Missions

414-256-3234; bwm@wels.net

Asia Lutheran Seminary (ALS) in Hong Kong started its 13th year of operation. The school runs five separate programs: a Bible Institute level program, an upper-level Bachelor of Theology, a Master of Divinity program both in Hong Kong and as an extension degree, and a translator training program. This



year, ALS has 4 full-time students in Hong Kong, 1 in India, and 10 other Chinese-speaking students outside Hong Kong. In addition, 50 other students take classes part time in Hong Kong, and another 60 take courses via the school's online program. Students from almost a dozen countries in South and East Asia participated in the translator training program. Native pastors are teaching or co-teaching courses for the Bible institute level, and this past school year an ALS graduate, Angus Cheung (pictured), was called and installed as ALS' first full-time Chinese professor. Learn more at wels.net/missions.

District news

NORTH ATLANTIC

On Oct. 3 and 4, the pastors and staff ministers of the **North Atlantic District** gathered for a special joint conference at King of Kings, Clifton Park, N.Y., under the theme “What Does This Mean?” The conference featured seven presentations on key teachings of Lutheranism and key events in Reformation history. The presentations were designed in a format similar to TED Talks (short presentations given by experts but geared towards non-experts). Each presentation was given by a district pastor and designed with non-Christians and non-Lutherans as the audience. The presentations were filmed to make it easy to share the key teachings and events of the Reformation with people unfamiliar with Lutheranism. Find these presentations at wels.net/reformation500/resources.

MINNESOTA

Fifty-five students from area WELS and Evangelical Lutheran Synod congregations joined for a mini teen retreat at **Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.**, on Sept. 2. The purposes for the retreat included bringing youth from the area together for an event focused on missions, learning about Martin Luther College, and packing birthday bags for community families. Students and their leaders brought items to fill the birthday bags, which were distributed to area food pantries. This event was sponsored by Martin Luther College and the Minnesota Valley Regional Mission Team of Kingdom Workers.

SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN

On Oct. 6 and 8, **St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Wis.**, dedicated its restored pipe organ. As Mark Jeske, pastor at St. Marcus, noted in a *Journal Sentinel* article, “We have some of the pipes that go all the way back to 1882.”

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

AZ-CA—Prince of Peace, Thousand Oaks, Calif., celebrated its 50th anniversary on Nov. 12.



PACIFIC NORTHWEST

On Oct. 15, **Messiah, Olympia, Wash.**, caught fire. Flames were discovered a few minutes into the pastor's sermon that morning. Everyone evacuated safely. The fire department fought the fire but ultimately labeled the building a complete loss. John Steinbrenner, president of the Pacific Northwest District, notes, “At the peak of Messiah's roof is a large wooden cross. The cross is still there, despite searing flames and thousands of gallons of water. The symbolism is a great reminder of God's grace, providence, and protection amid the destruction. Contrary to what the local paper said, *Messiah Lutheran Church was not destroyed*, just the building of wood and brick. With the Holy Spirit's blessing, the ‘church’ is safe in our Savior's arms, and his gospel work will continue in Olympia.”

DAKOTA-MONTANA



The sixth through eighth graders at **Good Shepherd, Sioux Falls, S.D.**, wanted to share their faith with their community. When the opportunity came to paint the plow on one of the city snow plows, the students decided to paint it in honor of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

D-M—On June 18, **Good Shepherd, Sioux Falls, S.D.**, observed **Norman Seeger's** 40th anniversary in the pastoral ministry.

MN—During the weekend of Nov. 4 and 5, **Martin Luther, St. Louis, Mo.**, celebrated the 50th anniversary of its congregation and the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

NW—St. Paul, Appleton, Wis., celebrated its 150th anniversary and the 500th anniversary of the Reformation with a dinner and five special services in the month of October.

On Oct. 1, **Trinity, Neenah, Wis.**, celebrated the 40th anniversary in the teaching ministry of **JoAnn Klemp**.

MINNESOTA



On Sept. 24, members of **Trinity, Nicollet, Minn.**, released 150 balloons to represent **Trinity Lutheran School's** 150th year. As the balloons were released, the congregation sang “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow.” Each balloon had a note attached with a Bible passage handwritten by a student at Trinity. The school also celebrated its anniversary with a special worship service.

St. Luke, Little Chute, Wis., celebrated the 40th anniversary in the pastoral ministry of **Ronald Szep** on Oct. 29.

SA—On Oct. 8, **King of Kings, Maitland, Fla.**, celebrated its 50th anniversary.

SEW—On June 18, **St. Paul, Muskego, Wis.**, celebrated the 35th anniversary of the pastoral ministries of **David Kuehl** and **Peter Panitzke**. **St. Paul** celebrated the 40th anniversary in the teaching ministry of **Linda Martens** on Sept. 17.

The district reporters for this month are: **AZ-CA**—Michael Schroeder; **D-M**—Andrew Hussman; **MN**—Jeffrey Bovee; **NA**—Philip Gurgel; **NW**—Dennis Kleist; **PNW**—David Birsching; **SEW**—Scott Oelhafen.



SALT

— of the —

EARTH

I must find strength in God's promises to carry out his words to bless even those who persecute.

Mark W. Henrich

I looked out at the congregation, and I hesitated. The text had been difficult for me. Too many hours during the week had been spent staring at these words: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse" (Romans 12:14). The thought kept coming, *Persecution? What do I really know about persecution?*

Persecution isn't just when bad things happen. There is a difference between problems and persecution. Persecution is hostility or ill treatment designed, intended, and targeted to injure, grieve, or afflict. It's something that happens because of race, ethnicity, political persuasion, or religious beliefs.

MODERN-DAY PERSECUTION

I may have difficult times in my life journey, but persecution has been—can it be?—absent. Yet I know persecution has not been absent in the lives of my spiritual brothers and sisters.

Walter—How can I not think of Walter? He grew up in an orphanage; served in World War II; and received a scholarship, sight unseen, to play ball at a major university. He arrived on campus, and the scholarship was taken away.

"Why, Walter?"

"They didn't know the color of my skin. What could I do? I had to go south to find a school."

Walter graduated, married, got a good job, and moved to a new neighborhood.

I commented on what a nice street it was. "Oh, Pastor, it wasn't always so quiet. We were the first people of color on this street. I can't tell you what things happened to me, my wife, and my children. Pastor, you wouldn't know."

No, I wouldn't. Persecution.

Michelle—Michelle was 16 when the phone call came. "Come quickly."

The family was in tears because the announcement had come from the father: He had arranged for Michelle to be married in his home country. The plane ticket was in hand to leave that same week.

Along with the arranged marriage came the further pronouncement. Michelle must give up Christianity and convert. If not? From her father's lips came the words, "I never want to see you again. You will not see my wife and the other younger children. Decide now. Obey me. Agree to marriage and your new religion or never be in my life again."

An ultimatum I've never been given. Persecution.

Avery—The 20-something-year-old Avery came to the church office to talk. So much had already happened in his life. In order to find a better life, he left his home country and traveled to South Africa, then to South America, and finally to Toronto. Here he came to know Jesus and became a Christian. How wonderful to share the joy of being brothers in Christ!

I asked Avery when he thought he would ever get home to visit family and friends. His words shook me. "Oh, I can never go home. Because I am now a Christian, my family has rejected me, and in the area I am from, I will be killed for following Jesus. And my community here now shuns me."

Rejected by family and not allowed home? Not me. Persecution.

JESUS, PERSECUTION, AND PAUL

I don't know much about persecution. But the Bible speaks often and openly about it. The word is used more than 50 times. Jesus himself talked about the reality of persecution and how his disciples are to respond. Do you recall his challenging words from the Sermon on the Mount? "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you. . . . Rejoice and be glad" (Matthew 5:10-12). "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20).

And so it happened. The apostles were arrested because they spoke about new life in Jesus (Acts 5). Stephen was martyred for his faith (Acts 7). Then we read, "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church" (Acts 8:1). Paul suffered persecution. He was flogged, stoned, threatened by his own countrymen, and imprisoned (2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

What does Paul write about persecution? "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." How is this possible? Bless—that is, to think well of or to wish God's blessings on—those who cause pain? Our hearts say no. Our hearts say to get even, to get revenge, to let others feel the pain they themselves have inflicted.

But Paul saw Jesus—the one who taught about persecution and the one who was persecuted. "When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his

wounds you have been healed' " (1 Peter 2:23,24). Paul saw the cross and forgiveness. He was healed. Paul could face whatever came his way. He would live for Jesus as Jesus had lived, died, and rose for him.

SOUL SEARCHING

That Sunday, I paused, prayed, and spoke more quietly than normal, "Persecution . . ."

I must soul search. I haven't seen persecution in my life. Not really. Is this because I am a spiritual wallflower and am better at blending in than speaking about my Lord? Or perhaps God has given me grace to live in a time and place where persecution has not been in my life story. Thank you, Jesus!

I must soul search. Have I been the persecutor, the one who has made life difficult for others? Am I quick to put down, in words or actions, those with whom I do not agree? God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

I must soul search. Have I been blind to the persecution, in all its forms, that goes on all around me? Have I stepped in? Have I stepped up? Have I spoken for those who are put down?

I must find strength in God's promises to carry out his words to bless—to bless, even those who persecute.

Walter did. "Pastor, I've seen a lot of ignorance in my life, but I've also seen how God worked things out in my life for good. And I know this. Jesus has never let me down."

Michelle received this strength. In the midst of tears in the room that night, came her words, "I choose Jesus."

Avery has been renewed. He will never go home. His community had ostracized him. "But, Pastor, it's okay. I know Jesus, and I have never known such joy."

And I am humbled—and strengthened. This is a hard verse. It is a beautiful verse. It is given to each of us.

Mark Henrich is pastor at Hope, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

This is the sixth article in a 12-part series about Christian love in action and how we can be salt in this world.

Bless
THOSE WHO
PERSECUTE
YOU;
Bless
AND DO
NOT CURSE.

ROMANS 12:14



CONNECTING CONGREGATIONS TO HISPANIC COMMUNITIES

Julie K. Wietzke

DIFFERENT HISTORIES, ONE FUTURE

When we talk about reaching out to other cultures in the United States, we can't ignore the amazing opportunities God is providing for us to share the good news of Jesus with Spanish speakers. Consider these statistics:

- Hispanic people are the largest minority in the United States, with an estimated 54 million Hispanic people comprising over 17% of the population (2015 Census).
- More than 75 percent of WELS congregations are located in areas of concentrated Hispanic populations (more than 1,500 Hispanics who live within three miles of the church).

But how do we reach out to people who speak a different language than we do? "You just need to have an open heart and a willingness to change, and be willing to love," says Timothy Flunker, WELS national Hispanic consultant.

EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES

Having an open heart may help you see the opportunities God has placed in front of you. A few years ago, Greg Pope, pastor at Trinity, Liberty (rural Manitowoc), Wis., began noticing more and more Hispanics as he made his door-to-door visits. "I would come across Hispanic families who didn't know a lot of English. They seemed interested in my message, but I couldn't communicate," he says.

He discovered that half of the workforce of the large local farms was Hispanic. He also found out his members had connections with these Spanish speakers—some as employers and some as fellow workers in the fields.

Pope contacted Flunker to find out how he and his congregation could reach this new mission field. Flunker suggested offering English Improvement Opportunity (EIO) classes as a way to meet their neighbors and build a base.

According to Flunker, most of the more than 100 WELS congregations doing Hispanic outreach started with offering English classes. These classes fill a need for the Hispanics who want to learn English, as well as create friendships and connections with congregation members that lead to witnessing opportunities. Gospel seeds are also sown when later classes begin with devotions in simplified English.

Eighteen months after Pope contacted Flunker, the congregation offered its first English class in October 2017. Much work happened during that time. Members were inspired to see this new opportunity. Neighboring churches were alerted. Volunteers were recruited and trained. The classes were advertised.

And yet, despite community interest, only one person came.

Most likely, this is because the classes started during harvest-time, when many Hispanics are working long, hard hours. But Flunker says it also can take time to break into the community. "I encourage congregations not to think in large, bold, success numbers [when starting]," he says. "Think one to two families. Just be content to get to know them, and they will be the conduit into that community."

Says Pope, "I'm very eager and excited for it to develop and gain momentum. Only God knows the result of it."

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Four years ago, Immanuel, Waukegan, Ill., a congregation that has just celebrated its 125th anniversary, also saw an opportunity. Waukegan had turned into a Midwest hub for Hispanic immigrants, with more than 65 percent of the community being Spanish speakers. Immanuel's school was drawing heavily from the Hispanic community and was growing steadily.



Top: English as Conversation Outreach classes at Immanuel, Waukegan, Ill., help the congregation create connections and friendships with the Hispanic community.

Bottom: Nixon Vivar baptizing several children at Christ, Milwaukee, Wis.



Wanting to reach out further into its community, Immanuel began English as Conversation Outreach classes. Over the course of four years, the classes grew, sometimes having 35 to 40 adult students a night. These students expressed interest in the church, but since the pastor didn't speak Spanish, the congregation couldn't offer Spanish services or dig deeper into the Word with them.

The congregation approached the Board for Home Missions, and this past spring, the board funded a bilingual pastor for the next three years to cultivate relationships with Immanuel's Hispanic prospects. Then Immanuel's current pastor plans to retire, and the bilingual pastor will take over the entire ministry.

Seth Haakenson, Immanuel's new bilingual pastor, is now connecting with the parents of school children and starting Spanish-language Bible studies in peoples' homes. Talking about faith in the Hispanic culture is not considered taboo, according to Haakenson. "They have grown up in a culture that is very religious, but they don't know who Jesus is," he says. "Once they know who Jesus is, the light turns on."

Haakenson says he probably will start Spanish-language worship in six months to a year, depending on the interest of the people. Some Hispanic families already attend the

English services, but other newer Christians want to worship in Spanish. "They want the Spanish services not because they don't want to integrate but because it's the language they understand the most for learning the Bible," says Haakenson.

That being said, he is quick to note that Immanuel is one church. "We have different histories, but we have one future," he says. "It's not languages and cultures that unite us; it's a common faith in Christ." To celebrate that connection, he says that the congregation will have purposeful bilingual events and bilingual worship in the future.

EXPANDING MINISTRY

Christ, Milwaukee, Wis., has been reaching out to its Hispanic neighbors on the southside of Milwaukee for more than 10 years. Its 200 members are evenly divided between Spanish speakers and English speakers. Its joint school with St. Peter, Milwaukee, even more so represents the community makeup, with 60 percent Hispanic students and between 30 to 40 percent Anglos.

The congregation has had a bilingual pastor since 2009, and just this year Nixon Vivar, a 2017 Pastoral Studies Institute graduate originally from Ecuador, was assigned as the congregation's second bilingual pastor. While Vivar will focus more on Hispanic outreach and Chad Walta, the congregation's other bilingual pastor, will focus more on the English side, they are working to overlap their ministries so that members, whether Hispanic or Anglo, see them both as their pastors and see the ministries as one.

According to Flunker, having pastors who speak both English and Spanish can make it easier to integrate Spanish-speaking families into the congregation, especially considering that children in these families often use English more than Spanish. With eight confirmands from the Spanish-speaking side of the congregation last year, involving this younger generation in church life is an exciting challenge. "They are the future of the congregation," says Vivar. "But how do we use their talents and energy to serve the Lord?"

Being mindful of the Hispanic culture can provide opportunities for reaching this community. Through offering baptisms and quinceañeras, two important religious events in the Hispanic culture, the pastors make connections within the community and can share the life-saving gospel message of faith alone. "Hispanics are very family- and friend-oriented," says Walta. "If one or two start coming to faith in Jesus and start coming to church, they're going to bring others."

Vivar, who grew up Catholic, says he feels blessed and privileged to share the gospel message. "If I can put in their hearts what Jesus put in my heart—the joy of salvation—if I put it in one heart at a time, I would be so happy."

Julie Wietzke is the managing editor of Forward in Christ magazine.

This is the fifth article in a series about cross-cultural outreach in the United States and Canada. Learn more at wels.net/missions.

DID YOU KNOW?

Twenty WELS congregations hold worship in both Spanish and English, and more than 100 locations have some sort of Hispanic ministry, ranging from English classes to simplified English worship to Spanish-language services.



God's love: Our song forever

With the long-lasting impact hymns can have, throwing some lines together or using "any old text" just won't do.

Michael D. Schultz

Thinking I'm not the most charming conversationalist to begin with, it was doubly challenging for me to visit Betty at her home once a month. A stroke had taken away a fair amount of her ability to speak, but then a subsequent series of mini-strokes robbed her of what little speech she had left. Delivering the devotion and saying the prayer were easy; it was the small talk that was challenging. It wasn't *like* having a conversation with myself; it actually was.

Until, one December, I sang a Christmas hymn with Betty. There was no doubt that she had learned the one about the herald angels singing. Her face lit up; she knew every word. I could hear her singing the words of the hymn far more clearly than any spoken response she had made in recent years. "God and sinners reconciled! Glory to the newborn King!"

As surprising to me as that particular case was, I know it's not all that uncommon. Hundreds of pastors tell dozens of similar anecdotes of elderly Christians clearly recalling hymns they learned decades earlier. But will there continue to be those

kinds of stories, and if so, what will be the hymn lines that those aging Christians recall?

HYMNS TELL THE STORY

From the home of an elderly shut-in, the scene changes to a large body of water in Egypt. What if you had just stepped onto the other side of the Red Sea without getting your feet wet? If Egyptians who were intent on killing you were instead washing up dead on the shore and God was fully responsible for your deliverance, what might you say? What might you sing? "I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea" (Exodus 15:1). You might sing about what God had just done for you. You might sing it over and over again until you know it by heart.

Good hymn texts tell that story, the story of God's deliverance through Christ. Like Christ-centered, law-gospel sermons that are fresh and energetic, good hymn texts tell the story of God's love for the unlovable, and they come at it from every scriptural angle imaginable. They speak of how the Father sent his only Son to take our place, how Christ suffered indescribable agony to purchase us, how Christ rose to take the sting out of our death. They tell of how the Spirit preaches forgiveness and faith in Christ into our hearts through Bible truth, how he pours those blessings over us in Baptism, how

he feeds those blessings to us with our Savior's body and blood.

Hymns that do that are going to last. They are going to be published in one Lutheran hymnal after another. And, with God being gracious to us, over and over again we and our descendants are going to sing about "the wonders God has done, How his right arm the vict'ry won. How dearly it has cost him!" (*Christian Worship* [CW] 377:1).

IN A MEMORABLE WAY

Christian recording artist Fernando Ortega wrote: "It's easy to write a chorus that says, 'God, you are a holy God. I need your grace to see me through. I need your mercy to make me new. Let me live each day for you.' I just made that up in 2 minutes and there's nothing wrong with it. It would fit easily and competitively among the hundreds of worship songs that are available to choose from."

Ortega went on to compare his quickly written chorus to a well-crafted, Christian hymn ("Come Down, O Love Divine"), which he described as "timeless."

But how does the hymnal committee determine which hymns will become timeless? We try to do that through comparative evaluations—thousands of comparative evaluations.

There's a reason Betty still knew that Christmas hymn. I can remember the comfortable smile on her face when I read her the Luke 2 Christmas account. The Christmas hymn, however, also included rhyme and meter and music. The combination made the truths of the incarnation all the more memorable for her. Hearing and singing that hymn in her childhood home and in the Lutheran congregation of her youth had anchored it in her heart.

With the long-lasting impact hymns can have, throwing some lines together or using "any old text" just won't do. Which lines would you want, would I

want, would we want to usher us into old age, to remain in our brains when our brains may be losing track of other less memorable, less important things?

Out of hundreds, here are a couple that have made a deep impression on me:

"When he shall come with trumpet sound, Oh, may I then in him be found, Clothed in His righteousness alone, Faultless to stand before the throne" (TLH 370:4; CW 382:4; _____).

"And then from death awaken me That these mine eyes with joy may see, O Son of God, Thy glorious face, My Savior and my Fount of grace" (TLH 429:3; CW 434:3; _____).

I've quoted the texts as I first learned them in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, but also with their *Christian Worship* citations. The blank space represents our next hymnal. There are, of course, plenty of things to sing about other than death and resurrection and judgment day, but none more important. Betty never had her eyes set on living in an oceanside mansion with an infinity pool that looked out over a dazzling sunset every evening. Her eyes were aimed at the mansions in the house of her heavenly Father, where she is today, free from the limitations of a stroke-riddled body and brimming with joy. She is, in fact, standing on the shore that's far better than the far shore of the Red Sea, the shore where the saints in heaven raise the hymn of how God has delivered them from every enemy. She's singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (Revelation 15:3).

The examples above are the kinds of texts that are worth singing, worth learning, worth preserving. In many cases, they are hymns from centuries past and have already appeared in hundreds of hymnals. In some cases, they

are from this century and are just starting to show up in a handful of hymnals. In every case, we are taking a close look at the words, making sure that they faithfully and accurately reference God's gracious deliverance in Christ and that they do so in a well-crafted way. We want such texts to make a lifelong impression in the hearts and minds of God's people, right down to our own youngest children and a generation yet unborn.

Michael Schultz, project director of the WELS Hymnal Project, is a member at Trinity, Waukesha, Wisconsin.

This is the sixth article in a nine-part series on hymns and their use in our churches.

The WELS Hymnal Project wants your feedback as it works on finalizing which of the more than 700 hymns from *Christian Worship* and *Christian Worship: Supplement* will be included in the new hymnal. Every month the WELS Hymnal Project will post a selection of hymns online, indicating which hymns are slated to be kept and which are slated to be cut. You can view the monthly list and, if you want, choose up to 10 hymns from the cut list that you would like to see kept in the new hymnal. To review this month's list of hymns and take part in the process, visit welshymnal.com.

“God” is not enough

Jeffrey L. Samelson

We do no one
any good by
considering a
“god enough”
belief “good
enough,” because
that kind of “faith”
dismisses most
of the Bible and
makes God a liar.

“Dad, I don’t understand why you’re so bothered by my boyfriend not going to church or being a Christian like us. He believes in God, and that’s enough for me.”

“People keep complaining that this isn’t a Christian nation anymore, but if you check the polls, it’s clear an overwhelming majority still believe in God.”

What do those two comments have in common? They equate believing in “God” with being Christian. While it is true that belief in a deity separates the religious from the nonreligious, believing that there is a “god”—even one who bears quite a resemblance to the God of Scripture—is not the same as having faith in the one true God and in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Which means not only that a person with such a limited faith is not a brother or sister in Christ but also that that person is not saved, not a child of God, and not someone we will see in heaven. James gives a rather sharp reminder to anyone comfortable equating monotheism with true Christian faith: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder!” (James 2:19).

Yet still many people who call themselves Christians and attend Christian churches—even some of our own—will echo the opinions of our compromising culture and say, “All that matters is that you believe in God.” This kind of “faith” not only conveniently does away with the differences between denominations but even unites Christians with cults, Judaism, Islam, and countless other religions. Perhaps even more conveniently, this “lowest common denominator” approach to belief also does away with about 99 percent of the Bible: everything that reveals the Lord as the one, true, triune God; everything that expresses his particular will for the world; everything that records his unique dealings with humanity; and, most important, the exclusive truth that heaven is gained only by grace through faith in

Jesus Christ, without any role for one’s works or merit.

But it is only in the Scriptures—the Word of God—that the Lord has revealed himself and his salvation to the world. Denying those truths is far from a neutral thing. We do no one any good by considering a “god enough” belief “good enough,” because that kind of “faith” dismisses most of the Bible and makes God a liar. Ironically, some may think love means not judging that anyone’s faith is insufficient, but God’s judgment on an insufficient faith is an eternity apart from his love.

This season is an ideal time both to remember and to act on this. Even though much has been done in our society to take Christ out of Christmas, it is still an effective occasion to introduce or reintroduce others to what exactly we celebrate: the particular and personal intervention of the one true God in the life of the world as not just a vague or fill-in-the-blanks deity, but as “the LORD [who] saves.” That’s what “Jesus” means (Matthew 1:21). He became flesh and blood just like us, was born in Bethlehem, and is Christ the Lord. *That* is good news of great joy for all people.

That there is a god is not news, and mere belief in “god” will never be good enough. Let’s instead profess and promote a rich, deep, and complete faith in the One in whom all the fullness of God dwells, who came to earth “to reconcile to himself all things . . . by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:20).

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



MONUMENTS

Lasting Memories

Two monuments taught the children of Israel—and us—one lasting lesson.

Samuel C. Degner

“To this day,” wrote Joshua (7:26). The people of Joshua’s day could still go and see two distinct monuments, which together taught one lasting lesson.

GOD’S WRATH

The Lord had just toppled mighty Jericho. So Joshua led his men against the next objective—Ai. He was confident in the Lord’s power and promise to give them the victory.

Instead, the Israelites were routed. Joshua was dumbfounded and cried out desperately: “Lord, how could you let this happen? If you promise to fight for your people and they lose, what happens to your good name?”

Indeed, the promise had been broken—but by Israel, not the Lord. Lying hidden beneath the tent of a man named Achan was plunder from Jericho that the Lord had commanded his people not to take, under penalty of death. As long as that sin remained between them, the Lord would not fight for his people.

But God showed mercy. He told Joshua about the sin and revealed the guilty one. Achan confessed, and both he and his family were stoned and burned. A pile of rocks was heaped over Achan, and that valley was named Achor, which means “trouble”—reminders of what disobedience brings.

The punishment might seem shocking. But it could have been worse. Death by stoning is nothing compared to what rebellion really deserves. Achan’s sad monument stands as a warning that it is a deadly serious matter not to listen to the Lord—a warning for me and for you still today.

You may even have your own sad reminder to this day of disobedience and rebellion—a scar, a broken relationship, a criminal record. On the other hand, maybe you managed

to hide your sin—at least from others. But God knows. He would have every right to crush you under his wrath.

GOD’S FAITHFULNESS

But the Lord is merciful.

Once the Israelites had dealt with Achan’s sin, the Lord turned from his anger, and he went right back to fighting for his people. He gave them a plan of attack and, when they followed it, he granted a resounding victory over Ai (Joshua 8). Its king was put to death, and a pile of rocks was heaped over his body—another monument, this one to God’s faithfulness. God’s people may have broken their covenant with him, but God had an even older promise to keep.

It’s a promise he repeated centuries later through his prophet: “I . . . will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. . . . I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God’ ” (Hosea 2:15,23).

Our rebellions should cut us off from the Lord and disqualify us from receiving his help. But Jesus stepped forward and owned our disobedience. He was executed for our crimes, crushed under God’s wrath in our place. By his death, the sin that had cut us off from God was removed and the Lord’s anger is turned away. We are God’s people through faith in Jesus.

As the Lord’s people, we know he has given us eternal victory over our enemies—and so much more. He has graciously promised to bless us. We can march forward in life, confident in his covenant of forgiveness.

His word still stands as a witness to that faithfulness; you can see it for yourself to this day.

Contributing editor Samuel Degner is a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin.

This is the eighth article in a nine-part series on Old Testament monuments and what they mean to us today.



God wishes to
create thankful
hearts in all of us—
hearts that are
not tied to the
size of his gifts.

Give us today our daily bread

Daily bread! When we learned the meaning to the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer in Luther's Catechism we memorized a list of the things included in daily bread. We also learned that God gives daily bread to all people. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminded us that our heavenly Father "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45).

We are in the habit of saying prayers when we sit down to eat. If God gives even without our prayers, why pray for daily bread? Those prayers are regular reminders that all we have comes from a gracious and loving God.

At times, we might find it difficult to be grateful when our customary blessings are interrupted and we are without. Then we worry. But Jesus reminds us not to worry. He pointed his disciples—and us—to the birds and the flowers. God feeds the birds each day and clothes the flowers so beautifully that even Solomon might envy them. Jesus said, "Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:32,33).

To some he gives abundantly. To others he gives little. We don't know why God gives some more than others. We can only face each day with the blessings he gives—much or little. God wishes to create thankful hearts in all of us—hearts that are not tied to the size of his gifts.

But the idea of daily bread creates a question. Is there more to it than just being thankful? Why does God give us daily bread and allow us to draw daily breath? For the evil and the unrighteous who receive sunshine and rain, life provides an opportunity to turn to

the Lord and discover his boundless love in Christ.

But life is not all sunshine. Sometimes God sends disaster, pain, or misery. With these he challenges both the righteous and the unrighteous to consider what Moses saw: Our days "are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away" (Psalm 90:10). He embeds another truth in trials and disasters: "Here we do not have an enduring city" (Hebrews 13:14). That heavenly city awaits all believers in Christ.

And when we count our blessings and note how richly he has blessed us, consider that God allows us to live as his disciples here. That means to show love and compassion—to love our neighbor as we love ourselves—and to use his blessings for others. The Macedonian congregation learned that lesson. Although they had difficulties and were in "extreme poverty," their love for Christ "welled up in rich generosity" for those affected by the famine in Palestine (2 Corinthians 8). We also have opportunity for generosity, compassion, and love.

One more thing: We pray the Lord's Prayer together in our worship. Certainly, we ask for our individual portion of daily bread, but we also ask that our fellow believers may have their portion too. We pray for *our* daily bread. Among the reasons that we ask God to bless us all with daily bread is so that we might have the resources to carry out the work of his church. Each one contributes some of God's blessings—some of that daily bread—in the collection plate. We share those blessings to proclaim our Jesus around the country and the world.

It is well for us to pray, "Heavenly Father, give *us* today *our* daily bread."



COME Lord Jesus BE OUR GUEST

NOURISHED BY MEALS WITH THE MESSIAH

Joel S. Heckendorf

BETHANY BUFFET (Luke 10:38-42)

The Thanksgiving turkey has barely settled in your stomach, and you're already planning the Christmas cookie assortment. Ever since God said in Genesis, "They will be yours for food" (1:29), eating has played an important role in our lives. Jesus also came and ate with friends, disciples, and others. Fully human, the "Son of Man came eating and drinking" (Matthew 11:19). We continue to invite him to be our guest at mealtime.

"COME, LORD JESUS, BE OUR GUEST"

"Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest." Martha didn't rush through those words as a precursor to, "Please pass the potatoes." She truly wanted Jesus to be a guest in her home. Martha often gets remembered for being on the wrong side of Jesus' rebuke, but don't miss the compliment: "Martha opened her home to him" (Luke 10:38). Considering the circumstances, her "Welcome" was more than a word on her door-mat; it was evidence of her faith in Jesus.

Welcoming Jesus was not cheap. Remember, he didn't travel alone. Martha couldn't just instruct her family, "F.H.B." (Family Hold Back), in order to stretch the mutton when Jesus landed at her Bethany home. Jesus usually arrived with 12 hungry students. I don't mind if my son brings a few friends home for supper, but if he brings the whole basketball team, I get concerned

about the grocery bill. Not Martha! She welcomed Jesus and his disciples into her home without counting the cost.

It wasn't only her checkbook. Having Jesus in her home also had the potential to cost Martha her safety and reputation. This Bethany buffet occurred during the "year of opposition." Jesus was no longer viewed as a popular miracle worker. He was increasingly viewed as a rebel who stood up to the "righteous" religious rulers. Yet, Martha "opened her home to him." May we too pray and live in such a way that invites Jesus to be our guest.

"AND LET THESE GIFTS TO US BE BLESSED"

At the same time, Jesus did not come to be served. He came to serve. This was a difficult lesson for Martha to learn. It's difficult for us too. Among the readers of this article are Sunday school teachers and funeral meal preparers, choir members, ushers, canvassers, councilmen, coffee roasters, and parent/teacher organization leaders. You may be tired of being the 20 percent who does 80 percent of the work. Thank you for your service to the Lord. Your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

But, "Martha, Martha," is your service getting in the way of being served? Even if you think it's not, listen to your Savior: Only one thing is needed (Luke 10:42).

Like Martha, your service is a blessing to Jesus' work and his people. But the Savior's primary goal is to serve you. That's a lesson Martha's sister Mary knew well.

Have you ever been told as the host, "Just sit down and enjoy the meal"? That's what our Savior says to you. Sitting at Jesus' feet with Mary, we are served endless helpings of forgiveness, inexhaustible portions of peace, limitless servings of grace, and an all-you-can-eat buffet of blessings.

Like Mary, may our prayer be, "And let *these* gifts to us be blessed."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. What helps sharpen your focus on "the one thing needed"?
2. How have you learned not to count the cost of service?
3. Read Matthew 6:25-34. What comfort do you have concerning the worries of this world?

Contributing editor Joel Heckendorf is pastor at Immanuel, Greenville, Wisconsin.



This is the first article in an 12-part series that looks at Jesus as a mealtime guest and how he blessed his fellow diners—and us—with his living presence. Find the article and answers online after Dec. 5 at wels.net/forwardinchrist.



Something to think about

Imagine what our Christmas celebration might look like to an outsider. This fictional letter is to help us see and treasure the real Christmas.

Joseph B. Johnson

DEAR STEPHANUS,

I can't wait to be home! There are so many strange and startling things to share about this country called America. Take their highest holy day, for example. It happens as the winter grows dark and the weather turns colder. The special day is named Black Friday, and it begins a four-day festival ending on Cyber Monday.

As far as I can tell the festival really starts on a day called Thanksgiving and ends with an oddly named Christmas day. This is perhaps the most bizarre festival I've seen! On Thanksgiving, or Black Friday Eve, from what I can see, they binge eat. I think it is because the next day many of them get up before the light and stand in lines in front of stores for hours. Once inside these sanctuaries, the worshipers stand in still other lines! There is great frustration on their faces, and sometimes they erupt in anger and violence. The poor hapless priests in the stores look even more miserable.

Not all go to these places of worship. Some sit in front of a computer and offer themselves to a god named Amazon. I believe Cyber Monday is the day particularly dedicated to that god. They are, of course, polytheists. Along with Amazon there is Apple, Walmart, Best Buy, Microsoft, Dell, Ford. Really there are more gods than even among the Hindus!

My brother, on this Black Friday they give to their gods over 70 billion of their dollars. That is a 7 with 10 zeros after it. It is enough to build a house for everyone in our small country! And that is but one day.

They tell me they are preparing for a day named in

honor of a man called Christ. It seems he comes at Christmas, and you see him everywhere at this time of year. He wears bright red, is very fat, and carries a bag of items around. I think he is fat to symbolize the beginning feast of the festival on Black Friday Eve. He carries a bag to hold all that he has bought at the festival. And I think he wears red because there is a madness in his heart and, indeed, in the people until his day when he leaves them and their sanity returns.

The festival lasts a month and ends on Christmas. I asked if there were any other holy day that was celebrated. One old man told me of a time when they celebrated a very ancient holy day, where all the sanctuary stores were closed and no one spent money—it was called Good Friday. He recalled no more but that it was followed by a festival with eggs and rabbits. I don't know either.

Give my love to your wonderful wife and daughters. I long to see you and the quiet peace of life in our country. Seriously, I can't stay much longer in this land. The other day I saw a priest holding a sign that said "50% off, hurry in soon" and I felt the tug to join all the others rushing into the temple. For a moment, I too wanted to give my heart to their gods! Pray for me, my brother!

SOON TO BE HOME,
YUSEF

Joseph Johnson is pastor at Amazing Grace, Portland, Oregon.

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Have a truly blessed and Merry Christmas as you celebrate forgiveness and our true riches in Jesus!