

Forward in Christ

A LUTHERAN VOICE



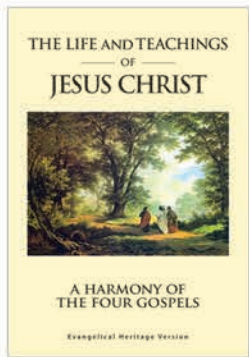
A light in the darkness

Do not be afraid. A Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord. *Page 10*

MORE THAN A STORY


This Is Christ the King

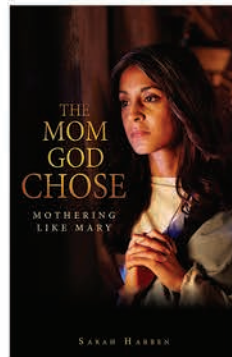
Since the moment the shepherds first shared the account of our Savior's birth, listeners have been in awe: "All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." NPH provides books and gifts that share with the world the awesome truth that Jesus is more than a story—he was and always will be Christ the King.



The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ


Jesus' birth was just the beginning of his perfect life. *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ* brings the four gospels together to share the extraordinary account of Jesus from start to finish. Nothing was added or changed to construct this harmony of the gospels; this book only contains God's Word. Be amazed by and share this awesome truth

again and again this season with *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*. EHV. Softcover, 238 pages. LU0105002, \$17.99 



The Mom God Chose Mothering Like Mary

Motherhood is a blessing from God. Perhaps no mother in history knew this better than Mary. Inspired by the film *My Son, My Savior* (LU3303024), *The Mom God Chose* contains 24 compelling chapters about the mother of Jesus Christ as well as interviews with present-day moms and helpful study questions. This close look at Mary's life makes a wonder-

fully uplifting Christmas gift for the mother in your life. Softcover, 168 pages. LU1201795, \$14.99 

My Spirit Rejoices CD

Raise your voice in praise of the newborn King with *My Spirit Rejoices*. This Christmas CD features encouraging songs from worship band Koiné, the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Chorus, and others. The beautiful melodies and Christ-centered lyrics will remind you what an incredible gift Jesus is for all people. One disc, 11 tracks. LU3401004, \$8.99



Noah's Ark Play Set

Children can learn about Noah's Ark, animals, shapes, counting, and more with this fun, 28-piece play set.

The wooden figurines—including Noah, his wife, monkeys, lions, zebras, and others—fit in and around the toy Ark for hours of interactive play. Give this Bible story play set

as an exciting gift to a young son, daughter, niece, nephew, or grandchild this Christmas. Ark measures 9.75 x 9.5 x 5.25 inches. For ages 2 and up. LU113986, \$29.99



To order, call 800-662-6022 or visit www.nph.net.

Prices are subject to change without notice. All orders are subject to shipping and handling fees and sales tax where applicable.



**NORTHWESTERN
PUBLISHING HOUSE**

www.nph.net

**NPH
EXTRA
PROGRAM**

 Find us on
Facebook

FEATURES

- 10 | A light in the darkness**
Fear gives way to light and joy because of the baby born in Bethlehem.
Jonathan R. Hein

- 12 | Evangelism lessons from our Savior**
Always be prepared . . . to ask a question.
James F. Borgwardt

- 14 | Confessions of faith**
Songs come from the hearts of African immigrants who love Jesus.
Daniel J. Laitinen

- 16 | Heart to heart: Parent conversations**
How can our families stay focused on Jesus this Christmas?

- 26 | Grace–Hmong outreach in Vietnam**
Through the gospel, the Holy Spirit brings many to faith in Vietnam.
Jonathan Bare as told to him by Wasa Lau

- 28 | Ambassadors: Help them see Jesus**
So many need to hear about Jesus. Pray for the opportunity to share Jesus with them.
Kenneth L. Brokmeier

- 30 | Guided through the darkness of doubt**
A woman's trust in God's plan for her is challenged.
Darla Nagel

- 36 | Let God's light shine**
Christmas can be a dark time. We need to share the light of Jesus.
Nathan W. Strutz



Grace

God's grace has opened doors to an unprecedented mission opportunity in communist Vietnam.

HMONG OUTREACH IN VIETNAM

Our synod has an amazing opportunity to build and operate a theological training facility in Hanoi, Vietnam, to reach more than **two million Hmong people** who live in Vietnam and the surrounding countries with the message of the gospel.

Promotional resources are available for your congregation to host a special **"Grace—Hmong outreach in Vietnam" Sunday** during the Epiphany season.

To learn more about the opportunity and how you can support this effort, visit **wels.net/vietnamhmongoutreach**.

"In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace" (Colossians 1:6).

EDITORIAL OFFICE

Forward in Christ magazine
WELS Communication Services
N16W23377 Stone Ridge Dr
Waukesha WI 53188-1108
Phone: 414-256-3210
E-mail: fic@wels.net
wels.net/forwardinchrist

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Rev. John A. Braun
braunj@nph.wels.net

MANAGING EDITOR

Julie K. Wietzke
julie.wietzke@wels.net

STAFF WRITER

Nicole R. Balza
Dayton Hamann

SEMINARY CONSULTANT

Prof. Samuel Degner

ART DIRECTOR

Karen Knutson

DESIGNER

Carianne Ciriacks

COPYRIGHT

©2018 by Forward in Christ. Printed in the USA. Forward in Christ grants permission for any original article (not a reprint) to be photocopied for use in a WELS church, school, or organization, provided that copies are distributed free and indicate Forward in Christ as the source. Artwork may not be reproduced except in the context of its article. For other copyright questions, contact Kristine Laufer, 414-615-5706; lauferk@nph.wels.net.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

POSTMASTER

Send address changes to Forward in Christ, c/o Northwestern Publishing House, 1250 N 113 St, Milwaukee WI 53226-3284.


Forward in Christ (ISSN 1541-8936) is published monthly through Northwestern Publishing House, 1250 N 113 St, Milwaukee WI 53226-3284. Periodical postage paid at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and additional mailing offices.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

Print: USA—\$17.99; Canada—\$18.89; all other countries—air mail \$71.99. Digital: USA—\$15.99; Canada—\$16.79; all other countries—\$15.99. Premium: USA—\$18.99; Canada—\$19.94; all other countries—air mail \$72.99. Postage included, payable in advance to Northwestern Publishing House. Contact Northwestern Publishing House for multi-year, blanket, and bundle rates. Northwestern Publishing House, 1250 N 113 St, Milwaukee WI 53226-3284; 800-662-6093. Milwaukee area, 414-615-5785. nph.net/periodicals.

ON AUDIO

Mission for the Visually Impaired, 375 Bridgepoint Dr, South St. Paul, MN 55075; 651-291-1536.

 Indicates additional online content

COVER IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

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

In our pages this month, we invite you to come and see:

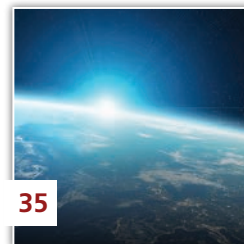
- Find the baby in the manger, that perfect child who came to die for your sins (p. 7).
- Calm your fears as you see your Savior, the Light of the world, who dispels the darkness of doubt and death (p. 10).
- Silence your heart from the cares of this world through the Messiah, who brings peace now and into eternity (pp. 30, 32).

We also urge you to go and tell:

- Share the message of forgiveness with your neighbors and acquaintances as you invite them to worship the Christ Child (back page).
- Look for ways to focus your family on Christ this Christmas (p. 16).
- Marvel at how the Holy Spirit uses us to spread his Word in far-off countries like Vietnam (p. 26).
- Pray for opportunities to help others see Jesus—and be ready when God gives them to you (p. 28).

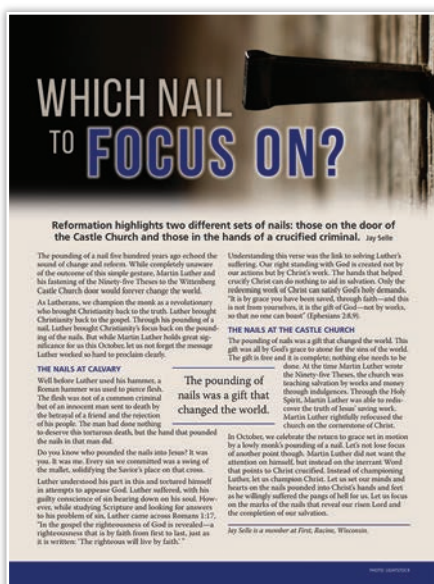
Have a wonderful Christmas!

Julie Wietzke



IN EVERY ISSUE

- | | | | |
|----|--|----|--|
| 6 | Feedback
Readers share their opinions | 20 | News
What's happening in WELS |
| 7 | Devotion
Joy to the world! He was born to die! | 32 | Editorial comment
What if your Christmas isn't so silent? |
| 8 | From the president's desk
Many varied blessings | 33 | Bible study
Majoring on the minors: Zechariah |
| 9 | Light for our path
Marriage customs and laws | 34 | A thought
No need? |
| 18 | Teen talk
Addiction comes in many forms | 35 | Interactive Bible study
The book of Revelation: Comfort in the midst of conflict |
| 19 | Bulletin board
Announcements from around the synod | | |



OUR SAVIOR'S LOVE

I read with interest the article "Which nail to focus on?" [Oct.]. The title to the article is fascinating and aroused my interest. I commend the author for the thoughts he included in the article.

However, permit me to comment on the statement in the fourth paragraph which reads, "Every sin we committed was a swing of the mallet, solidifying the Savior's place on that cross." While our sins made the cross necessary, they did not "solidify the Savior's place on that cross." What did solidify his place? Love did. As John 3:16 teaches, God's love for sinners moved him to send his Son to die on the cross to redeem and save them. Jesus recognized that death as the Father's will and graciously suffered a horrible death on the cross to pay the penalty and the punishment for our sins.

I appreciated the thoughts of the nails used for the crucifixion and the nails used for the posting of Dr. Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses.

Thank you for the edifying and encouraging articles you include in each issue of *Forward in Christ*.

*Carl W. Voss
Watertown, Wisconsin*

TRAINED FOR BATTLE?

I disagree with "Trained and ready" [Aug.]. To use President Schroeder's

Through my Bible in 3 years

Read or listen online at wels.net/bible3.

DECEMBER 2018

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

analogy of training troops for battle: Our young people are sent out with only basic training. WELS is good at basic law and gospel, the milk of the Word: You're a sinner; Jesus died for everyone. Believe it and be saved. That is not the meat and potatoes that will prepare them for combat on the university campus.

Somewhere along the line we teach them that they must go it alone because we are separate from everyone else. We do not teach our people how to support each other. . . .

We don't teach apologetics (defending one's faith) to our young people, nor any personal witnessing.

We are good at teaching what God did long ago, but we are poor at knowing or showing that the Lord is an intimate God doing marvelous, gracious things in our lives every moment of every day.

*Duane Vanselow
Independence, Oregon*

OPPORTUNITIES FOR OUTREACH

I thank President Schroeder for his message "A tragic inconsistency" [Oct.]. As a layperson, he has given me another story line—to visit with friends to strangers at the next life-and-death drama.

His close, "It's that message that God

has entrusted to us to proclaim . . . and to share individually with our friends and neighbors," brought to mind Pastor Jonathan Hein's closing comments at the 2017 WELS convention (A Demographic Study of WELS):

- "Let us, like those disciples on the day of Pentecost, come out of the room where we talk about Jesus only with our fellow believers and go into our community and tell all about 'the promise . . . for you and your children.'"
- "Let us set aside all fear, all timidity. For when we were baptized, the Holy Spirit was poured out on us in abundance too."

In adversity there is opportunity. Yes, I should be mindful of President Schroeder's encouragement and share my faith when adversity strikes.

And when the day is calm and bright? I must also remember that first day of Pentecost and answer: If not me, who? If not now, when?

*Mark Boche
St. Francis, Wisconsin*

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*.

Joy to the world! He was born to die!

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. Hebrews 2:14,15

Peter M. Prange

There is perhaps no event that brings greater joy to the human heart than the birth of a child. How many times have we watched the scene play out on our television screens? A young mother is in the throes of childbirth being urged on by her doctor, “One more good push.” An anxious father stands nearby, awaiting the long-anticipated outcome.

And then it happens. We hear the newborn cry, and the little baby is placed into Momma’s trembling arms. She sheds tears of joy and celebrates the amazing, divine gift of new life. Dad grabs his cell phone to broadcast the baby’s birth in one big blast. Life is worth celebrating, and parents can’t help but share their joy.

OUR SAVIOR IS BORN

It was no different for the virgin Mary on that first Christmas night, though the circumstances were entirely different. No warm hospital room, not even a room in the inn. Her birthing center was most likely a dank, dirty cave. There were no doctors or nurses to attend to her needs. She probably made do with a nervous husband and some unassuming farm animals. But despite those differences, what joy! True, Joseph didn’t tweet, but as the babe was wrapped in swaddling clothes, the holy angels announced his wondrous birth.

For good reason. This child would bring joy to more than a select group, courtesy of a text message. So, instead the angel proclaimed to the shepherds, “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the

Lord” (Luke 2:10,11). A Savior has been born to you. What joy!

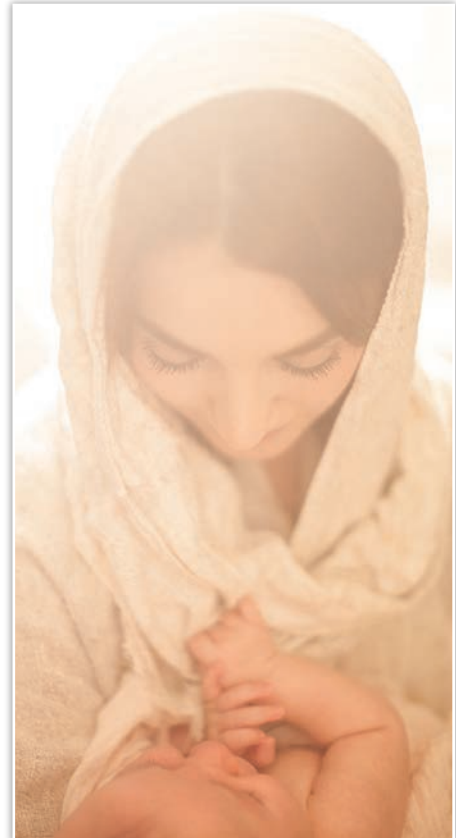
OUR SAVIOR MUST DIE

Let precisely what that means sink in. Why was Jesus born exactly? Our Savior was born to die. At least that’s the point an inspired writer emphasized in his letter to the Hebrews. We who are flesh and blood needed a Savior-God who was flesh and blood too. Why? So that he could die for us in our place, be our sacrifice, yes, become “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He was born so that “by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.”

Our Christmas
joy should always
include a tinge of
Good Friday sadness.

In other words, our Christmas joy should always include a tinge of Good Friday sadness because the one naturally foreshadows the other. It’s a biblical truth beautifully depicted by Johann Sebastian Bach in the final chorale of his *Christmas Oratorio*. There he intertwines the celebratory tones of trumpets with words set to the Good Friday tune of “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”—a poignant reminder that Jesus was born to die.

But why? To “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” True, it is sad that Jesus was



born to die. But what does his death and resurrection bring? Freedom from fear. Life eternal. Victory over sin, death, the devil, and hell. In other words, joy. We have eternal joy that is found in the fact that our Savior was born to die our death so that we might live forever.

Contributing editor Peter Prange is pastor at Bethany, Kenosha, Wisconsin.



Mark Schwede

Nothing compares
to the various
ways in which
God is building
his kingdom
among us.

Many varied blessings

Anyone who has visited New Zealand will tell you that there is simply no place on earth like it.

One of the most striking things about New Zealand is its unrivaled natural beauty. Most visitors arrive on the North Island in the capital of Auckland, a large city located on a beautiful harbor. Drive only an hour to the south and you find yourself in rolling hills with thousands of grazing sheep. Travel another hour and you are standing on the shores of a strikingly beautiful lake created by an ancient, massive volcanic eruption. Keep driving and you will have an opportunity to hike on any one of four volcanoes (thankfully dormant).

The South Island is just as striking. You're first greeted by flat sandy beaches. But only hours later you find yourself gasping at the grandeur of the Southern Alps. A little later you stand in a humid, tropical rain forest. But then you look up, and towering above you only miles away is the massive Franz Joseph glacier. All this from the creating hand of a powerful and gracious God!

At year's end, I invariably take time to recall some of the things that have taken place in our synod during the previous 12 months. Seeing God working through his Word is always a reason to marvel and to give thanks. But it's not just the *amount and scope* of the work that God has done to build his church; it's also the *variety* of ways God is blessing the spread of his gospel.

In our congregations, God feeds the faith of his people regularly with Word and sacrament in worship and in classes. Many congregations sacrifice to provide Lutheran elementary schools, high schools, and colleges—not only for their own children but for mission prospects as well. The growth in the number of early childhood programs is staggering.

Beyond congregations we see dozens of WELS-affiliated organizations car-

rying out specific ministries designed to serve people and spread the gospel.

On a synodical level, we see how God enables us to maintain schools that train future called workers and how he provides the young people who have been moved to say, "Here am I; send me!"

WELS Congregational Services provides resources to congregations and individuals to assist them in stewardship, evangelism, discipleship, worship, and ministry to those with special needs.

I consider the many ways in which our Board for Home Missions is busy spreading the gospel: planting traditional mission congregations, working with existing congregations to open second campuses or plant daughter congregations, and providing campus ministries that serve our own students and that reach out to other students on college campuses who so desperately need to hear God's truth.

I am amazed to see how our world mission efforts are reaching people from the refugee camps in Sudan to the mountain villages of Nepal. Through online instruction we are training spiritual leaders in every country in Latin America; we have requests from nearly a thousand others from around the world for theological training. WELS students teaching English in East Asia have helped to establish a new Lutheran synod there. Now we have been invited by the government of Vietnam to establish a school in Hanoi where ethnic Hmong pastors will learn what it means to be Lutheran. (Read more on p. 26.)

The list could go on.

New Zealand is striking and beautiful and varied in its unforgettable geography. But nothing compares to the various ways in which God is building his kingdom among us. We marvel at what God is doing. And we thank him for the privilege of being a part of it.

Want to learn more about these ministries? Check out the WELS website, wels.net.

Light for our path

Were Joseph and Mary engaged or married when Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy?

James F. Pope

Your question illustrates the need to bridge the culture gap of marriage customs and laws that existed in biblical days.

ESTABLISHED BY COMMITMENT

In our society today, we are familiar with relationships that progress from friendship to dating to engagement to marriage. Because we are used to this sequence of events, we might think that people in biblical times followed the same pattern. That was not the case.

“Betrothal,” as the term appears in some Bible translations, was not the engagement of our day and age. Betrothal in biblical days was when the bride and groom, or their representatives, signed papers to commit themselves to each other and to establish the beginning of their marriage. From that point on, the man and woman were legally married, but they did not have the right to live together as husband and wife or have sexual relations with each other. They lived separately for a time until the wedding celebration took place. Then, the man and woman lived together as husband and wife. Jesus’ parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) illustrates the interval of time between the beginning of a marriage and the wedding celebration.

When Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant (Matthew 1:18,19), they were between the time when they had established their marriage and before any wedding celebration was going to take place. They were legally married. Only death or divorce (Deuteronomy 22:22-29) could break the bond they had established, and divorce was on Joseph’s mind.

ROOTED IN LOVE

Joseph is the forgotten man in the account of Jesus’ birth. Mary receives appropriate attention as the one whom God graciously chose to be the one to give birth to the Son of God (Luke 1:30-33). But what about Joseph?

We first come across Joseph in the family tree of Jesus’ human ancestry (Matthew 1:16). We learn that Joseph came from royal lineage, but we know little else about him. We are aware of what Joseph was thinking when he realized Mary was pregnant: “Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly” (Matthew 1:19).

Mary’s miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit put Joseph in a challenging situation. Without knowing about the Holy Spirit’s work in Mary, Joseph could only conclude that Mary had been unfaithful to him. If Joseph had wanted to press the issue, the results could have been disastrous for Mary and the unborn child, the Messiah (Deuteronomy 22:23,24). Love for God and for Mary led Joseph to pursue a different course of action—a divorce that was intended to shelter Mary from public shame.

God thwarted that plan by directing an angel to inform Joseph in a dream that Mary’s pregnancy was the result of the Holy Spirit’s work. We see Joseph’s love for God in his next waking moments: “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife” (Matthew 1:24). The last words of that verse demonstrate that Joseph and Mary were legally married at this time.

Joseph was a man who displayed the kind of love that reflected the love of his foster son and Savior: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). Joseph and Mary’s marriage was established by commitment and rooted in love.

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

James Pope also answers questions online at wels.net/questions. Submit your questions there or to fic@wels.net.

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

Psalm 119:105

A dramatic landscape at sunset or sunrise. In the foreground, a simple wooden manger sits on a rocky surface, partially covered with dry straw. The background shows a vast, hilly landscape under a sky with warm, golden light from the setting or rising sun. The title "A light IN THE DARKNESS" is overlaid on the top half of the image, with "A light" in a white script font and "IN THE DARKNESS" in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

A *light* IN THE DARKNESS

Fear gives way to light and joy because of the baby born in Bethlehem.

Jonathan R. Hein

"They were sore afraid." I remember reciting those words as a Lutheran elementary school student. I also remember asking my teacher what that meant—*sore* afraid. He paused and then answered, "They were so scared it hurt."

Not bad. Indeed, fear comes in a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum is some mild uneasiness or worry. It is a nuisance, but you can live with such fear. But at the other end is crippling panic, anxiety so thick it makes you feel ill. You are *sore* afraid—terrified.

THE SHEPHERD'S TERROR

That type of fear—the type that makes you break out in a cold sweat—is what

the shepherds experienced on that first Christmas Eve. Why? "An angel of the Lord appeared to them" (Luke 2:9).

This is not the first time an angel appears in Luke's gospel. In chapter 1, an angel appeared to the priest Zechariah. Zechariah "was gripped with fear" (v. 12). Throughout Scripture, when one meets an angel, fear is the normal reaction. It is not simply that the person has never seen an angel before. They have never seen *holiness* before. That holiness is what is so scary.

Flaws become frighteningly visible when you hold them against the foil of perfection and power. For example, I am not afraid to play golf with my friends. They are hackers like me. My game looks just fine compared to theirs. Conversely, I would be terrified to play golf with Tiger Woods. My golf swing is hideous

compared to his. The perfection of his game would expose the ugliness of mine.

Those shepherds—face to face with a holy, *perfect* angel—were stripped of all illusions that they were "good people." Their flaws, failings, and sins became that much more glaring as they looked at perfection. They knew they were *far* from holy.

But there was something else that made them "sore afraid." "The glory of the Lord shone around them." In the darkness, they were suddenly bathed in light. But it was not a full moon or nearby bonfire. It was "the glory of the Lord."

You find that phrase often in the Old Testament. In Exodus chapter 24 we read, "To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain" (v. 17).

The glory of the Lord was a visible manifestation of God's presence, and it filled the Israelites with dread. Likewise, on that first Christmas Eve, the shepherds knew they were not only in the company of an angel. God was there. Thus, the terror.

OUR FEAR OF GOD

But what makes God so scary?

First, we are aware that God sees all and knows all. Imagine it someone said to you, "I had a miniature drone following you for the past year, 24/7. It recorded everything you did and said." Wouldn't that be terrifying, knowing people could watch everything you did, even what you did in private? Well, someone *was* watching. There is no "behind closed doors" to God. He is everywhere, all the time. There are no secrets you can keep from God. He can and does read your thoughts. Everything about you is exposed to him. That is scary.

Second, we know God is our Creator. And when one creates something, it is for a purpose. The farmer plants his crop so that others might eat. The engineer designs a machine to make some sort of work easier. The artist paints to inspire others with beauty. Likewise, God made us for a purpose—to be as flawless as that holy angel, to show perfect love for God and our fellow man. But we have failed. We have not lived according to that purpose. God knows that too. That scares us.

Third, we know that God does not let sin slide. If good tolerates evil, it ceases to be good. God is good; therefore, he *must* punish sin. Justice *must* be served. God has seen the sin you committed today. He *cannot* let it go. There *must* be punishment. It is a scary truth, yet truth nonetheless.

"The glory of the Lord shown around them, and they were terrified." We might imagine the fear of the shepherds. Their hearts were pounding. Their legs went weak. The silly, little things we tend to worry about in life

suddenly seem just that—silly and little. They faced a legitimate reason to panic—being in the presence of an all-seeing holy God who hates sin and punishes it with breathtaking wrath.

WE HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid'" (Luke 2:10).

Angel means "messenger." The angel was simply sharing what God wanted the shepherds to know. Fear was unnecessary. Why? "A Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. . . . You will find a baby" (Luke 2:11,12). Yes, the glory of the Lord surrounded the shepherds that Christmas Eve, but it was *not* a consuming fire. God came to earth as a tiny, helpless, newborn baby. There was nothing scary about his person, nor anything scary about his purpose. He had come to be "a Savior."

The shepherds went from being horrified to understanding that they need fear nothing, not even death.

Because God is holy, where there is sin, blood must be shed. Because God is love, he took on our flesh so that he might have blood to shed for us, to atone for all that sin.

The angel said, ". . . born *to you*." What heart-stirring words! These were shepherds. They were not among the societal elite. No one considered them special. But their almighty God did, despite their flaws and failings. God wanted these humble shepherds to know that the Savior had come not just for some generic "world." He came specifically for them.

And just like that, the shepherds went from being horrified to understand-

ing that they need fear nothing, not even death. Their God treasured them. "A baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" would make peace between sinners and a holy God.

The promised Messiah would open to them—to us!—the gates of Paradise.

WE HAVE A MESSAGE TO SHARE

I am told that having a near-death experience changes someone. A crotchety old man has a massive heart attack and survives. He's changed—less irritable, more pleasant.

Being inches from death helps one prioritize life correctly. The shepherds just had a near-eternal-death experience. They were forever changed, their lives reprioritized.

"When they had seen [the child], they spread the word" (Luke 2:17). It is a dark, scary world. The shepherds had the light. They were compelled to let it shine, sharing "the good news that will cause great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10).

Brothers and sisters, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). As Christmas draws nigh, meditate on that. You were a whisker away from God's powerful hands snuffing you out. It is okay, healthy even, for that thought to send a shiver down your spine. For then, when you look into the manger, you will see more than a baby. That is the Light in the darkness. That is the Savior given *to you*. You will be warmed. Your fears will melt. And you will "spread the word," just like those shepherds.

Merry Christmas!

Jonathan Hein, director of WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling, is a member at Trinity, Waukesha, Wisconsin.



EVANGELISM

lessons from the Savior

Always be prepared . . . to ask a question.

James F. Borgwardt

Witnessing to strangers doesn't come naturally for many Christians, myself included. But like anything else, it becomes easier with practice.

The essential elements for every Christian witness are God's law and gospel. But how do we get from a cordial "Hi" to the message of sin and grace? My favorite tool is a question.

Actually, there are three specific types of questions that help move conversations in the direction I want. The first question turns the dialogue spiritual. The second helps to assess and clarify the non-Christian's views. And the last draws us to our destination: the cross of Christ.

All of them help keep the conversation cordial and non-threatening when they are used with people like Joe.

THE FIRST QUESTION

Joe sat in the next seat on our flight to Chicago and struck up the conversation. His story of leading multiple successful business ventures in the city matched his style and appear-

ance. My story as a pastor didn't share much in common, except that I have a brother serving a congregation on the north side of Chicago. That was my segue to Question 1: "Do you have a church home?"

He didn't. It wasn't long before he shared his view of religions: "All of them teach basically the same thing. How can Christians insist that they're the only ones going to heaven?"

THE SECOND QUESTION

Would you have given a quick answer? Jesus wouldn't. At least he didn't when the rich young man in Matthew chapter 19 asked him a question about eternal life. Instead, Jesus responded with a question of his own. Answering a question with another question was common for Jesus. He often extended conversations with questions and not answers.

This is another evangelism lesson we can learn from Jesus' dialogue in Matthew chapter 19. When someone comes to you with a question about the Christian faith, don't always be so quick with an answer. Try a question instead.

"A man came up to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?'

'Why do you ask me about what is good?' Jesus replied" (Matthew 19:16,17).

Jesus fielded questions from a variety of people with a variety of motives. Some raised questions to trap him. Others were hurting souls who approached him in desperate need. They pleaded for mercy from the only one they believed could help them.

The rich young ruler fit neither of these extremes. His question was both serious and seriously misguided. He respected Jesus as a great teacher. He approached him with a genuine desire to receive new insight into his godly living. He loved the law of God and convinced himself that he had kept it. Yet he felt that he was missing something—something that would finally give him the peace with God that he craved. He figured that the renowned rabbi from Nazareth could prescribe the elusive, extraordinary work that needed to be done. He was ready to carry it out and thereby earn the assurance that life everlasting was indeed his reward.

This young man came to the right man for the wrong reasons. And Jesus could have told him as much. But a question was the more effective tool.

The same is often true in our witnessing.

Granted, Jesus was far better at this than we could be. He knew the perfect response to a question long before it was asked. Not being God, we can't do that.

But questions do serve us well in these crucial conversations. They help us assess the person and their situation. They buy us time as we think how to best lead this soul to the cross.

More than that, asking questions helps us in similar ways to how it helped Jesus in his ministry. Questions display that we're genuinely interested in the person with whom we're speaking. And questions lead that person to do some important self-reflection. They are a polite, nonconfrontational tool to help the other person reexamine his assumptions.

When Jesus replied with, "Why do you ask me about what is good?" the man had to start digging into the assumptions that were buried beneath his question.

We want people to do the same thing. This is where Question 2 comes in handy. It's the question, "What makes you say that?"*

In my conversation with Joe, I responded to his claim that all religions basically teach the same thing with, "What makes you say that? In what way are they similar?"

Like the man in Matthew chapter 19, Joe held the natural opinion that good works gain the reward of eternal life. He didn't understand grace. Outside of Christ, no one can.

THE THIRD QUESTION

At the time, I responded with a C. S. Lewis illustration of how the one word that separates Christianity from all other religions is *grace*. And that opened into a law and gospel witness.

But thinking back on it, I could have asked Joe a third question that's become my favorite. Sometimes it's the only one needed. It's direct and polite at the same time. Question 3a is, "What you do believe about Jesus?"

Try it. And after asking it, just listen. The response could be a hundred different kinds of wrong, but fight the urge to

correct the person. People appreciate that you don't want to argue. By listening, you'll earn the right to speak. When they're done, ask permission to do so with Question 3b, "May I share with you what I

believe about Jesus?" Then share the good news of God's eternal love for all people in Jesus. The Holy Spirit will bless it as he sees fit.

ANSWERS POINTING TO JESUS

You may be thinking, *That's all fine and good. But the apostle Peter commanded a different approach: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). He told us to be prepared to give an answer, not a question.*

Yes, we need to be prepared to give answers too! Read 1 Peter chapter 3 in its entirety. People will ask us about our eternal hope when they see us respond to evil with love and grace. They'll want to know why. They'll cut right to the point. And so we respond.

Paul, Silas, and the jailor (Acts 16) lived out the exact scenario that Peter outlined. When the Philippian jailor fell trembling before them and asked a question of desperation and hope, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" it was clear to the evangelists that this man was in a far different—and far better—spot than the man in Matthew chapter 19. He was ready for the gospel.

So Paul and Silas replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

God grant that we're all prepared with questions and answers pointing to Jesus.

James Borgwardt is pastor at Redeemer, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.

This is the second article in a three-part series on evangelism lessons from the account of the rich young man in Matthew chapter 19.

*Thanks to Christian apologist Gregory Koukl for these insights.

[Jesus] often extended conversations
with questions and not answers.

Songs come from the hearts of African immigrants who love Jesus.

Daniel J. Laitinen

On a typical Saturday afternoon when most people are doing chores, watching TV, or just checking out after a long work week, you will find African native Israel Asongo making music at his church in Austin, Texas.

Israel and his pastor have gathered a group of African immigrants from the area who meet every week to learn Bible stories, practice English, pray, eat, and sing together for the entire afternoon. With every Bible story comes a new sense of awe about God's rich love for them. Scribbling down a weekly Bible passage in English, they are eager to practice their pronunciation.

Then Israel plugs in his keyboard, turns up the speakers, and cues his choir. His bright demeanor is enough to fill the space. When the music begins, you are transported to a country and culture far away from a little church in central Texas. "It's not like the music you're used to in church," Israel says with a smile. They worship all afternoon using every vocal chord and muscle: singing and swaying for Jesus. The music is unlike anything this church is used to.

GOD'S GRACE IN AFRICA

So how did God bring about this opportunity to bless both immigrants in the

Austin area and Holy Word Lutheran Church?

Born in the Congo, Africa, Israel has had an incredible journey. His father was a Christian preacher, his mother a full-time parent of 11 children. His first memories of the gospel and music were with his family in the home. They would sing traditional African hymns and songs late into the evening.

Israel's love for sharing the gospel is inspiring. He once went into the African bush to share the gospel with a primitive—and sometimes suspicious and violent—pygmy tribe. Israel says, "If you want to share the gospel with them, you must first find a translator from their tribe willing to accompany you. Then, before you go, you must dress like them. I had to change out of my clothes and put on basically leaves you find along the way. Otherwise, you are a threat and they will not speak with you. Then you must eat whatever they put before you. They roasted a small animal on a stick over a fire and told me to eat it like they do. Then, once they saw me eat it, they were pleased and said, 'Okay. Now give us your message.' You cannot start by just telling them about Jesus. You must start with who God is because they do not know. I told them, 'The rocks and trees and river, these are not gods, but there is a God who created it all.' It all takes time to teach them what they never knew."

Life in the Congo can be dangerous for Christians like Israel. His father

was persecuted and killed for his faith. "Some of my family, I don't know today whether they are alive or not," he says. Faced with persecution himself, Israel made a daring escape. "Many people wanted to kill us Christians. They gathered hundreds of us in a stadium to be executed. As the executioner was on his way, we ran for the exits—some of us this way, some of us that. They began shooting. By God's grace, I escaped."


After living in the bush for ten days surviving on only sugar cane, Israel crossed two countries and could have been deported back to Congo. Finally, he arrived at a refugee camp in Kenya. "All by God's grace," he says.

Life in the refugee camp wasn't easy either. Divisions between religious groups, poor shelter, sickness, and persecution continued. However, Israel met his wife, began a family, and shared the gospel even in this harsh environment. Speaking six languages and understanding ten, he became a teacher and interpreter for the United Nations.

Finally, one day he and his family were selected by lottery to be relocated in the United States. His son was very ill at the time, and the news came as a huge relief. "It was an answer to prayer!" Israel says.

GOD'S GRACE IN AMERICA

Today Israel lives in Austin, Texas, with his family. Life in America was another major adjustment. He recalls one summer evening in his new home when he



Confessions
OF FAITH

heard what seemed to be gunshots, bombs, and explosions outside. Remembering similar violence in Africa, he feared for his family's life. He assumed that death was imminent. He gathered his wife and children into the corner of their apartment. He prayed to God to spare them. The next morning they woke up, alive. He went outside. To his amazement there was no damage or injury to people or property. It was the morning of July 5!

One day Israel was at a store when he heard a man singing a Christian song one aisle over. Israel began singing along. The two voices found each other at the end of the aisle. They laughed and introduced themselves. "Do you have a church home?" Israel's new friend Stacy asked.

Israel said he did not.

"You do now!" Stacy said, inviting him to his church, Holy Word.

Months passed, but Stacy still hadn't seen Israel in church. When they ran into each other once again, Stacy said, "Israel, come home."

Israel smiled and said, "I like that!"

From then on Israel began attending Holy Word. I invited him to Bible information class. As we studied the Word together, Israel soon knew he had found a home.

"Why did you choose our church?" I asked.

He replied, "Because you teach us about

the Bible: sin and Jesus. Not every church does that."

One Sunday Israel approached me with a request: "I want to share what I learned here with more people like me. Can I invite some immigrant friends in Austin to meet here, sing, and learn God's Word with you?" Within a month Israel's Saturday group was studying God's Word, praying, and singing. After several months, the group performed an African music concert for the congregation that drew in many visitors and other immigrants to Holy Word.

Israel's choir has changed the perspective of Holy Word members as well. Lyn, a weekly volunteer who brings food for the group, says, "Israel's group is such an encouragement to my faith. Most of the choir members are older teens and young adults, and it is so inspiring to experience their joy as they worship the Lord. In their young lives they have undergone trials and poverty

that I as an American cannot really imagine, yet they are filled with thanksgiving for what they have. Their joy and love for Jesus shines in their faces and through their voices. It is a blessing for our church to be able to connect with brothers and sisters from across the world, and they remind us of how much we too have to be thankful for."

One Saturday evening on the car ride home, a choir member asked Israel, "Why is this church doing this for us? What have we done to deserve food and kind treatment?"

Israel replied, "Because they have Jesus in their heart."

Dan Laitinen is pastor at Holy Word, Austin, Texas.



View a short video of the African music concert at Holy Word at **wels.net/forwardinchrist**.



Israel Asongo (front row, right) and his young adult choir with Pastor Dan Laitinen.



heart to heart
parent conversations

Sometimes providing ideas to tackle parenting challenges can get complicated. We deal with some complex issues as we raise these little people. Other times, it's surprisingly simple.

This month, our authors remind us that we don't need to go to great lengths to focus our families on Jesus this Christmas. Simple traditions, simple questions, and simple explanations can provide rich opportunities to worship our King and celebrate his birth.

Interested in beginning your own family Advent devotion time this year? Visit forwardinchrist.net/chrismons for a resource that can help you put together a devotion similar to the one the Geiger family enjoys (see Anna Geiger's article).

Nicole Balza

Join the conversation!

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

HOW CAN OUR FAMILIES STAY FOCUSED ON JESUS THIS CHRISTMAS?

During most of the year, our family gathers each evening for a Bible story and song. But we take a break from our regular devotions for Advent. Instead, we sit at the dining room table around a lovely handcrafted Advent tree, a gift from my father-in-law.

SIMPLE ADVENT DEVOTIONS

First, my husband lights one or more candles, depending on how close we are to Christmas. Then we choose a Chrismon (a Christmas decoration with a Christian symbol) to hang on the tree. My husband leads an impromptu devotion based on the symbol we've chosen, and we conclude with a verse of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

The short devotions are often simple. The cross reminds us that Jesus died to take away our sins. The shell reminds us that God forgave our sins and brought us into his fam-

I can see the candlelight in her eyes. It flickers there in the dark sanctuary. It lights up her small face in constantly new ways as the flame dances, pushing shadows off her face. It was Christmas Eve 2014. She was singing "Silent Night."

I almost lost it. I hope it wasn't just sentimentality. I doubt it was. I long for something as a father. I pray for it more than most anything else in my life. It makes me do things like ask my daughter every day on her way to school, "Who are you?" Just to hear her say back, "I'm a blood-bought child of God." It makes me haul out my little devotional every night at dinner or lay on the Bermuda grass outside just so I can point to the stars and say, "Look at what God did." I want my daughter to see the Lord just like Job once did (Job 42:5).

There are few better places to see him than the manger. I've got no secret sauce for that. I'm not sure

It's almost Christmas. Time stops for no one. So we dash through the snow to pick up kids. Buy the latest toy. Find dresses for the girls and suits for the boys. Bake Christmas cookies. Help the kids memorize their part in the Christmas services. Set up Christmas get-togethers with our family and friends. Bake more Christmas cookies. Schedule and wrangle crabby kids to get family pictures taken for the two hundred Christmas cards we have to order, address, place in envelopes, buy stamps for, and send. Decorate upstairs. Decorate downstairs. Decorate outside. Did I mention bake cookies?

My house, inside or out, doesn't look like a Pinterest page. My kids might be wearing hand-me-down dresses and suits for the Christmas services. My gifts might not be wrapped until the night before Christmas Eve (and might just be placed into a gift bag!). We will eventually get the Christmas tree up. And perhaps a string of lights outside . . . if we've taken them down from last year. My cookies just



ily through Baptism. The lamb is a symbol for Jesus, the Lamb of God. Sometimes our devotions are a little more complex. We may talk about the fish being an ancient Christian symbol because the letters of the Greek word for fish stand for Jesus. We may talk about the Chi-Ro, which looks like a P with an X on top. These two letters are the first letters of the Greek word *Christos*, which means Christ.

Our five oldest kids (4, 6, 8, 10, 11) take turns doing different jobs. One chooses the Chrismon, another places it on the tree, a third child turns out the lights, a fourth child passes out the music, and a fifth has the favorite job of blowing out the candles. Because our youngest will be turning 3 this Ad-

vent season, he will be part of the devotions as well. I suppose we will need a sixth job . . . but I don't think we're ready to let the kids take turns lighting the candles!

A MEANINGFUL TRADITION

With a house full of young children, I wouldn't exactly call our Advent devotions peaceful. And the proximity of children to open flames keeps my husband and me at the edge of our seats. But all of us look forward to this simple family tradition. Not only does it distract us from the hustle and bustle of the season, but it also keeps our eyes on our coming Savior.

Anna Geiger and her husband, Steve, are raising their six kids in Mequon, Wisconsin. Anna is the creator of The Measured Mom, an education website for parents and teachers.



we even have totally rooted family traditions around Christmas yet. I do know that I've done some things now for a few years. I love to walk with her up to the Chrismons. I love telling her what they mean. I love talking to her about the lights on the tree and how they point to the Light of the world. I love talking to her about the Christmas lessons she learns every year at Sunday school. I love interrupting her occasionally to remind her to back out of the commercialism and to ask her what the season is really about. I love to open the presents with her and tell her where they all ultimately come from and what the best gift of all is. I love to bust out the hymnal and sing a Christmas hymn before we go to sleep. I love to help her with her recitations just so I can make a comment to her about what they mean.

I hope you know I'm not slavish about how I lean into unique Christmas moments. I'm not. There is a time and a place for everything. Sometimes it's best simply to grab

some Christmas cookies together and laugh about how crazy her dad is. At Christmastime I do, however, maintain the regular ways I disciple my daughter and always look for opportunities to use the uniqueness of the season to connect truth to her soul. No, it's not a secret sauce. It's just real life, trusting the Spirit to use the Word in my daughter's life.

I love my daughter. More than anything else I want her to have the joy of seeing the Lord in her life. I want that because I know that is what will chase away the shadows and darkness that lie within her and will make light dance in her little heart in new ways all year long.

Jonathan Bourman is a pastor at Peace, Aiken, South Carolina. He and his wife, Melanie, have a six-year-old daughter.



might be bought from the local grocery store. But, this is what allows our family to savor and enjoy Christmas. The simplicity.

You don't have to spend hundreds of hours or dollars making a perfect Christmas. We already have a perfect Christmas with the most perfect gift—Christ Jesus. Our focus should not be on making more work for an earthly perfect—one that takes the center of attention away from the true meaning of Christmas—but on how to bring our loved ones closer to the manger.

First comes our beautiful Christmas Eve service filled with children's voices, praises to God for sending his Son, and the comforting passages and hymns we have committed to memory.

Then our family continues in sharing God's goodness in our living room. Sharing the blessings he has given us, reminding our children of the best gift that allows us to give

them gifts, and reveling in the love of family—one of the most marvelous gifts God has given us on earth.

Traditions are wonderful and can be amazing blessings to you, your children, and your grandchildren. **But in the busyness of Christmas, might I suggest keeping it simple?**

Set aside time to spend with your family.

Find a Christmas service or two.

Remind your loved ones of the greatest gift of Christmas.

Breathe in the crisp winter air (or the warm breeze).

Take in some twinkling lights.

And feel the love of Jesus envelop you.

Rachel Learman and her husband, Paul, are raising four children in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.





teentalk

Addiction comes in many forms

If you suffer from an addiction, you are not alone. Jesus wants to help you.

Dinesh Ting Tadepalli

Most days during summer break, I would wake up around 8:50 A.M., turn on the TV, and just lie on the couch.

Here's the problem: There are shows always airing on TV, 24/7. Because of this, I would constantly watch TV, while also constantly texting on my phone. I never wanted to miss a single episode on TV or text from my phone. It was clear that I was addicted. Overall, I was pretty sluggish during summer break. I didn't want to do anything else.

And it did not work out for my good. Heading toward the first day of the school year, I was very lazy. Though I didn't often watch TV during the school year, I was on my phone frequently. I was addicted to my phone. You could say my motto at that time was "First play, then work." I wanted to know what the next message would be. I'd tell myself every couple of minutes to do my homework thoroughly and diligently. But later, I found myself cramming in my homework at the last second before school.

My irresponsibility eventually led to a huge blow when I saw my first quarter grades. It was the worst quarterly GPA of my high school years. I wanted to hide the grades, but I couldn't. And I

couldn't go back in time and change them. What happened, happened. The toothpaste was already out of the tube, and I couldn't put it back. My addiction was controlling my life and my grades. What happened during summer break had taken over.

I know I'm not alone. Others daily and excessively use drugs and/or cigarettes, play video games, watch pornography, or text on their phone. They sacrifice what is important for their addiction.

And the worst is that your addiction cannot be seen as okay, because it's slaughtering your faith in what matters most—Jesus Christ. You think of him less and less. It may happen that what you want becomes more important than your faith.

Jesus is what should be meaningful in your life. He lived a perfect life and died not just for your addiction but also for all of your wrongdoings. There may be consequences of your addiction, like my poor first quarter grades. But God annihilated the spiritual consequence—eternal death. God doesn't see you as a filthy sinner. Despite your addiction, he sees you as his holy and righteous child. Because of Jesus, God delights in you.

When you remember that, you can do something about your addiction. To destroy a sinful addiction, you have to take it out by the root. If you are addicted to drugs and/or cigarettes, throw them all in the garbage. If it is video games, uninstall all your games and use your computer less frequently. If it is pornography, block it and get rid of your computer. If it is texting, power off your phone and do something that gives glory to God. You may also need to seek counseling. But what's even more important is to stay strong in your faith.

If you think that you'll never get rid of your addiction, you're actually right. You probably can't get rid of it. But Jesus can. Nothing is impossible through him. With his strength, you can conquer your addiction. He is always by your side.

Dinesh Ting Tadepalli, a junior at Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, Wisconsin, is a member at Eastside, Madison, Wisconsin.

CHANGES IN MINISTRY

Pastors

Bushaw, Robert, to Pilgrim, Mesa, Ariz.
Feldhus, Patrick, to The Lutheran Home Hope Residence, Belle Plaine, Minn.

Georgson, Seth, to Martin Luther, Saint Louis, Mo.

Glende, Andrew, to Lighthouse Youth Center, Milwaukee, Wis.

Grube, Curt, to Emanuel, Forestville, Wis.

Gurgel, Philip, to Trinity, Waukesha, Wis.

Heckendorf, Joel, to Light of the Valleys, Reno, Nev.

Holtz, Matthew, to St. Paul, Appleton, Wis.

Jenswold, Joel, to Lord of Love, De Forest, Wis.

Kleist, Dennis, to retirement

Lemke, Dennis, to retirement

Nass, Nathan, to St. Paul, Green Bay, Wis.

Stellick, Kevin, to Nebraska Evangelical Lutheran High School, Waco, Neb.

Sullivan, Michael, to Divine Word, Nepean, Ontario, Canada

Vander Galien, Paul, to St. Paul, Stratford, Wis.

Wagenknecht, Nathan, to Faith, Anchorage, Alaska

Wong, Gary, to Zion, New Ulm, Minn.

Teachers

Foelske, Alexa, to St. John, Wrightstown, Wis.

Horn, Katherine, to St. Paul, Muskego, Wis.

Lemke, Judy, to retirement

Mattek, Karen, to Immanuel, Greenville, Wis.

Pelke, Joy, to St. John, Westland, Mich.

Unke, Jacqueline, to Water of Life, Las Vegas, Wis.

Winkel, Candace, to retirement

Staff ministers

Garbe, Robert, to retirement

Hanke, Daniel, to retirement

Voss, Nathan, to St. Paul, North Mankato, Minn.

Walker, Kevin, to Bethlehem, Germantown, Wis.

Correction

Tricia Engelbrecht accepted a call to St. John, Caledonia, Minn., not St. John, Caledonia, Wis., as was reported in the October issue. We apologize for the error.

SYNOD CONVENTION

The 65th biennial convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod will be held July 29–Aug. 1, 2019, at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. The convention delegate fee, paid by the calling body the delegate represents, is \$275.

The deadline for submitting memorials to be printed in the *Book of Reports and Memorials* is Jan. 15, 2019. Memorials submitted after Jan. 15 and approved for convention consideration will be posted on the convention website, wels.net/2019synodconvention, if they are received by June 15, 2019. Further directions can be found at wels.net/2019synodconvention. Send memorials to the President's Office, N16W23377 Stone Ridge Dr, Waukesha WI 53188; carla.martin@wels.net.

NOTICE FOR CONGREGATION TREASURERS AND PASTORS

We thank God for you and for your support of the ministry WELS carries out on behalf of all congregations. We ask that you continue to mail your Congregation Mission Offering (CMO) deposit and its processing coupon to our bank lockbox, which provides effective and efficient deposit processing for the synod. For your CMO payment to be included in reported receipts for the month, it must be received in the synod's bank lockbox on or before the last business day. An exception is made for December offerings. Gifts received by the bank lockbox up to and including Jan. 8, 2019, will be credited as 2018 CMO, if accompanied by a 2018 coupon. Thank you for your assistance.

ANNIVERSARIES

Kenai, Alaska—Grace (40). Dec. 9. Worship, 10 A.M.; historical presentation and dinner to follow. RSVP requested. beph.mlc@gmail.com.

Janesville, Wis.—Peace (60). Jan. 13, 2019. Worship, 9 A.M.; banquet to follow. RSVP requested. rwlehmman@sbcglobal.net; 608-752-0258.

COMING EVENTS

Live nativity—Dec. 1. Martin Luther, Oshkosh, Wis.

Living nativity—Nov. 30–Dec. 2. St. Paul, Muskego, Wis. Nov. 30–Dec. 1, 6–9 P.M.; Dec. 2, 6–8 P.M. Performances run every 20 minutes. Sally Wallner, 414-422-0320, ext. 294.

Live nativity—Dec. 7–8. 6–8 P.M. Christ, Eagle River, Wis. Hosted by Christ, Eagle River, and St. John, Phelps, Wis. Presentations run 20 minutes. 715-479-8307.

WELS ministerial education school Christmas concerts—

- Dec. 1, 7:30 P.M.; Dec. 2, 4 P.M. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. 507-354-8221.
- Dec. 9, 3 and 7 P.M. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. 262-242-8100.
- Dec. 16, 3 P.M.; Dec. 20, 10 A.M. Luther

Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis. 920-261-4352.

- Dec. 21, 7 P.M. Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich. 989-793-1041.

Mid-term graduation—Dec. 13. 10 A.M. Chapel of the Christ, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. 507-354-8221.

Final service—Zion, Van Dyne, Wis., is closing its doors after 136 years. Final service, Dec. 30, 10:30 A.M.; a catered lunch will follow. Past members and friends of Zion who wish to attend the service and/or meal are asked to RSVP. 920-872-2785.

Young adult conference—Awake and Alive. Jan. 4–5, 2019. Best Western Plus Milwaukee Airport Hotel & Conference Center, Milwaukee, Wis. Website, awakealive.com.

SERVICE TIMES

Gulf Shores, Ala.—Risen Savior, Navarre, Fla., will hold church services with Holy Communion for Gulf Shores area WELS/ELS snowbirds at 4 P.M., Jan. 6 and 20 and Feb. 3 and 17 at St. Jude By the Sea Lutheran Church, 312 E 16 Ave, Gulf Shores. Bible class will follow. Evan Dobberfuhl, 715-573-0808; tpcevan@gmail.com.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY

Teachers—East Fork Lutheran High School on the Apache mission near Whiteriver, Arizona, is looking for retired WELS educators to teach two or three courses to small classes of Apache high school students. It will provide a fully furnished one-bedroom apartment on campus plus utilities and a stipend of \$4,000 for each course taught. eastforkschool@gmail.com; 928-338-4455.

NAMES WANTED

Faculty nominations—Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, Wis., is inviting nominations of individuals qualified to teach in Christian higher education either as full-time faculty or in an adjunct capacity in the following academic fields: neuroscience, computer science, accounting, marine biology, and sports management. Candidates must be an active member of a WELS or an Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) congregation and hold or be pursuing an advanced degree in their field. To nominate a candidate, use the form at wlc.edu/human-resources.

Find additional community events and resources at welsrc.net. To place an announcement, call 414-256-3210; bulletinboard@wels.net. Deadline is eight weeks before publication date.

THE SPECIAL NEEDS FAMILY NETWORK

Is your family looking for Christian resources, support, and encouragement as it cares for a child with special needs? The Special Needs Family Network, coordinated by WELS Special Ministries, offers resources and parent mentoring. For information, e-mail specialneeds@wels.net.

From the age of 12, Stern has been involved in a community program called Sibshops that connects siblings of individuals who have disabilities. Sibshops, offered by the organization WisconSibs, provides educational components but primarily

focuses on creating community and sponsoring fun events. The organization also allows opportunities to ask questions about specific disabilities or long-term illnesses and to grow in understanding each person.

"Being able to bond with other siblings and see them have fun with each other helps to normalize everyone's situation and see everyone for who they actually are," Stern says. "I continually see the impact that this has on people's lives."

Stern started out as a member of WisconSibs and eventually served on the Board of Directors and the program committee. He sees the organization as a way that God has used him to serve others. It was also a motivating factor in him becoming a teacher.

"It helped me realize that I want to help people in my career," Stern says. "That was God's direction in my life. It gave me an opportunity to be the hands of Christ and show his love."

Gabriella Moline

Let your light shine

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

Ben Stern loves being around his sister. The siblings discuss sports and their jobs and spend quality time together with Ben's three children. Ben was never embarrassed to have his little sister around when he was growing up but would invite her to join in his and his friends' activities.

Amanda Stern has Down syndrome, but it's not what defines her relationship with her brother.

"I don't think of my sister as having a disability," Ben, a chemistry teacher at Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Appleton, Wis., remarks. "I think of her as my sister."



Amanda Stern with her brother Ben and his children.

Booknook

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



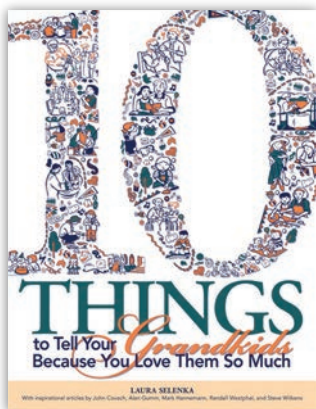
One of life's greatest joys is becoming a grandparent. One of the most fervent prayers of grandparents is that the Lord would keep their grandchildren close to him. The new book *Ten Things to Tell Your Grandkids* is a wonderful resource to help Christian grandparents as they look for ways to talk to their grandchildren about Jesus.

As we think about how to approach conversations with our grandchildren, we can sometimes be a little hesitant or unsure. We're hoping to say the right thing or wondering how they will respond. In each chapter, Laura Selenka starts with an article sharing ways to approach this conversation. She provides helpful tips, personal anecdotes, and some great food for thought. I especially loved the next section

that includes the thoughts of grandparents who read the articles and then put Laura's encourage-

ment to practice with their own grandchildren. The responses are honest, insightful, and sometimes humorous. She wraps up each section with suggestions for next steps for you and me.

This easy-to-read and thoughtful book covers topics that include Baptism, trusting God, finding a spouse, and heaven. This book would be a great gift for any grandparent you know or a gift for yourself as we look to "tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord" (Psalm 78:4).



PRICE: \$8.99

Cindi Holman
Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin



for the **Generations** *to come*

SMALL GROUPS ARE A LINCHPIN FOR MINISTRY TO MILLENNIALS

“I started going to growth groups here, and that fueled my faith like never before,” says Jackie Torres, a 29-year-old member of St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Wis. “Finding people who wanted to talk about Jesus was awesome as well as seeing firsthand how fellow Christians would filter their lives through what God says. And to dive deeper into his Word and become a closer community of Christians is such a powerful thing.”

James Hein, a pastor at St. Marcus, says that Torres is a good example of a Millennial—someone who was born from 1980–2000. “Millennials are looking for close relationships,” says Hein. “We try to ensure that small group ministries are an essential part of the St. Marcus culture. We currently have 12 to 15 small groups running, and virtually all of our leadership comes from and is involved in these small, relational study groups.”

MINISTERING TO MILLENNIALS

WELS Congregational Services offers training materials on a wide variety of ministry topics. Four videos with accompanying discussion guides are available on the topic of “Ministering to Millennials.” A “Ministering to Millennials” playbook also details ten important ministry behaviors for congregations to consider as they reach out to this age group. Visit welscongregationalservices.net, choose the “Modules” dropdown menu, and then choose “Discipleship Modules.”

Hein himself prepares the material for most of these groups, often based off of the previous weekend’s sermon. A lay facilitator then presents the material to the group and helps group members work through it. Usually these groups meet in members’ homes over a meal, but they can also meet in coffee shops or restaurants. The location is not as important as the relationships that are built as members get to know one another and share life experiences with each other.

As Hein notes, “Small groups play an enormous part in peer-to-peer relational ministry. If you look at the design of the average sanctuary, all pews or seats are facing one direction. While there’s nothing wrong with that, it’s not horizontally relational. Therefore, your congregation needs to intentionally provide spaces where people face one another. Small groups are when people gather around the Word facing one another. It creates a transparent dialogue in which people can share struggles, confess sins, receive encouragement, and grow together as they’re growing in Christ. Not having

a robust small groups system is not an option for churches that desire any sort of dynamic Millennial ministry.”

Torres agrees. “I attended a growth group at a friend’s house soon after I joined St. Marcus, and now I lead one with my fiancé. We get the opportunity to have real conversations about faith and how to put it into action in our lives in a like-minded Christian community. I depend on it.”

Luke Thompson, who serves as a pastor at St. Paul, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, puts it this way: “Consider Jesus’ ministry. We know he spent three years preaching and teaching, but what did that look like? Dinner parties. And lots of them. In fact, one of the chief attacks against Jesus was that he was eating with the wrong sorts of people. In other words, he was building meaningful relationships and friendships in the best way possible—over a meal. He was breaking through the devices that caused loneliness in his own time, oftentimes showing people the heart of God by befriending them. And he invites us to do this today.”



Small group Bible studies are an important part of the ministry of St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Wis.

Christian Life Resources celebrates 35 years

Since 1983, Christian Life Resources (CLR) has been helping people of a variety of backgrounds navigate family and life issues in God-pleasing ways. CLR's mission is to use these issues "as bridges to convey the love of God and to share the message of salvation through Christ."

CLR's origins precede its official inception. When abortion was legalized in the United States in 1973, many WELS laypeople and pastors were inspired to respond. Soon, the first WELS pregnancy care center opened in Palatine, Ill. Similar facilities popped up throughout the country shortly after.



CLR National Director Robert Fleischmann spoke at the 2018 Celebration of Life Event at Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, Jackson, Wis. One hundred people attended this October event.

The leaders from these centers came together for their first convention in the fall of 1982. The following spring, WELS Lutherans for Life was formed at Good Shepherd's, West Allis, Wis. This national organization would later be renamed Christian Life Resources.

Robert Fleischmann, who has served as CLR's national director for 30 years, notes that the ministry has changed significantly since he began.

"When I started in 1988, there really was a single primary issue: abortion," he explains. "Today, we provide resources on the Christian perspective of a wide spectrum of life and family issues including infertility, birth control, challenging pregnancies, birth defects, cancer treatment, medical directives, health care, gender issues, transplants, stem cells, and many more."

Fleischmann says that CLR frequently receives requests for information from church leaders and laypeople on these complex and often challenging topics.

"In a Bible information class, a woman asked me about vaccines," says Philip Janisch, outreach pastor at Trinity, Brillion, Wis. "I e-mailed CLR and was quickly provided with a wealth of information that explained the history of vaccine creation and a Christian judgment on whether Christians can use vaccines in good conscience. Christian Life Resources is a wonderful source of information for tough questions dealing with life issues."

Besides its central office located in Wisconsin, CLR has 14 pregnancy care centers in eight states. Together, the centers provided practical assistance to nearly 10,000 clients in 2017. On average, about 19 percent of their yearly clients are non-Christian or have no church affiliation, offering opportunities for outreach.

CLR also sponsors New Beginnings—A Home for Mothers. Located in Milwaukee, Wis., New Beginnings provides a safe, caring, Christian environment for single mothers and their children. General education, career training, and spiritual guidance help residents develop the confidence and skill to live independently.

Fleischmann anticipates that the ministry of CLR will continue to expand and adapt in order to respond to developments in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and other social issues.

Despite the difficulties that may be ahead, Fleischmann says that CLR is committed to reflecting the selflessness of Jesus Christ in all that they do. "We have the opportunity to talk about what it means to have someone sacrifice for you—and that someone is Jesus. He sacrificed for us. Dare we be any less loving?"

Visit christianliferesources.com to learn more.

Obituaries

Dale R. Oechler 1961–2018

Dale Oechler was born Sept. 2, 1961, in Kenosha, Wis. He died May 28, 2018, in Weyauwega, Wis.

A 1984 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., he taught at Trinity, Jenera, Ohio, and St. Peter, Weyauwega, Wis.

He is survived by his wife, Corky; his parents; one son; two sisters; and two grandchildren. He is preceded in death by one son.

Robert Willhite 1931–2018

Robert Willhite was born Sept. 27, 1931, in New Ulm, Minn. He died June 1, 2018, in Appleton, Wis.

He taught at St. John, Rural Boyd, Minn., and St. Paul, Algoma, Wis.

He is survived by one daughter, one son, two grandchildren, one great-grandchild, and one sister. He is preceded in death by his wife, Carol, and one sister.

Kenneth L. Leverage 1930–2018

Kenneth Leverage was born Feb. 17, 1930, in Milwaukee, Wis. He died June 7, 2018.

He taught at Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wis.

He is survived by his wife, Pat; 4 sons; 3 daughters; 27 grandchildren; 7 great-grandchildren; 1 brother; and 2 sisters. He is preceded in death by one sister.

Floyd D. Schwecke 1931–2018

Floyd Schwecke was born March 31, 1931, in Gibbon, Minn. He died June 13, 2018, in Fond du Lac, Wis.

A 1952 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., he taught at Trinity, Bay City, Mich.; Bethel, Milwaukee, Wis.; St. James, Milwaukee, Wis.; and Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wis.

Meet the editorial staff

He is survived by his wife, LaDonna; 3 sons; 2 daughters; 14 grandchildren; 4 step-grandchildren; and 8 great-grandchildren. He is preceded in death by two brothers and four sisters.

Marjorie J. Holz 1943–2018

Marjorie Holz (née Ladewig) was born Oct. 27, 1943, in Waukesha, Wis. She died June 19, 2018.

She taught at St. John, Mukwonago, Wis.

She is survived by her husband, Ken; three daughters; seven grandchildren; one brother; and one sister.

John F. Chworowsky 1931–2018

John Chworowsky was born May 12, 1931, in Milwaukee, Wis. He died July 9, 2018, in Lake Mills, Wis.

A 1957 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.; Gethsemane, Davenport, Iowa; Trinity, Caledonia, Wis.; Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wis.; Northwestern College, Watertown, Wis.; the Hong Kong mission; St. Paul, Riverside, Calif.; Ascension, Macomb, Mich.; and Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel, Madison, Wis.

He is survived by his wife, Johanna; two sons; one daughter; eight grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

Alice M. Sebald 1929–2018

Alice Sebald (née Reek) was born May 29, 1929, in Weyauwega, Wis. She died July 23, 2018.

She taught at Emanuel, New London, Wis., and St. John, Wauwatosa, Wis.

She is survived by her husband, Donald; 6 sons; 2 daughters; 23 grandchildren; and 18 great-grandchildren.

Ever ask yourself, “Who are these people who write for Forward in Christ?” Through this series, you can find out.

This month, *Forward in Christ* welcomes Timothy Westendorf to the editorial staff as the newest interactive Bible study contributor.

Westendorf’s first Bible study series begins with the end; he is tackling a 12-part series on the book of Revelation.

“Revelation intrigues some and intimidates others,” he notes. “But God intends rich comfort to his church through this book with the message of Jesus’ ultimate victory over every enemy.”



The Westendorf family enjoys a Colorado Rockies baseball game.

Westendorf currently serves at Abiding Word, Highlands Ranch, Colo. He grew up in Wisconsin and is the son of James Westendorf, who served at Christ the Lord, Brookfield, Wis., and, later, as a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon.

The young Westendorf fondly remembers the kindness that he felt from others at his home church. “I was always impressed with how

warmly I was embraced by the older people within the church,” he explains. “They had no reason to care for me other than the fact that I was their pastor’s son and they saw me as a fellow Christian.”

He also recalls moments when his young mind didn’t quite yet grasp some of the more challenging vocabulary of the liturgy: “I would hear my dad introduce the spoken Psalms with the phrase, ‘We will read the verses *responsively*.’ But I thought he said ‘*responsibly*.’ I sometimes worried I would accidentally read the words ‘irresponsibly!’”

As he grew, he continued to be inspired by his father and the many teachers, professors, and other leaders he encountered in WELS schools. In his education to become a pastor, he attended Northwestern Preparatory School (now Luther Preparatory School), Watertown, Wis., and was part of the first graduating class at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. Afterward, he pursued the ministry at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. He lists then-president of Northwestern College John Braun, Daniel Deutschlander, Thomas Nass, Phil Hirsch, and many others as his role models throughout his education.

“I could give you a hundred names,” he notes.

Westendorf is married with four children. His wife, Kelly, has a nursing degree and works part-time for Visiting Angels, an in-home elder care service. Their boys—John, 13; Micah, 11; and Benjamin, 8—all enjoy baseball, basketball, and football. Their daughter, Makenna, 6, prefers gymnastics.

When asked what message he has for *Forward in Christ* readers, Westendorf says, “It is my prayer that the readers keep their focus on Christ and the full and certain blessings they have in him.”

Journey into Revelation with Westendorf in his first Bible study on page 35.

WELS news briefs

WORLD MISSIONS

414-256-3237; missionspromotions@wels.net

This year marks the **25th anniversary of the renewal of the Ukrainian Lutheran Church (ULC)**. On Easter of 1993, two Lutheran public worship services took place in the Ukrainian cities of Kyiv and Ternopil. Pastors from WELS and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod were first preachers and then teachers of theology for this Lutheran church body. “The history of Ukrainian Christianity . . . reaches back to the tenth century,” says V’yacheslav Horpynchuk, bishop of the ULC. “But as in times prior to the Lutheran Reformation the pure gospel doctrine of justification by grace through faith was darkened by lots of different false teachings. But now the light of grace is shining more and more brightly in the country of Ukraine.” The ULC has been celebrating with events at the local congregations during the year and a special worship service at its *Sobor* (synod convention) in October. It has 16 organized congregations and more than six hundred baptized souls. The Board for World Missions and its Europe Administrative Committee work together with the ULC to share the gospel in Eastern Europe. Read more at wels.net/25-years-of-grace-renewal/.

SPECIAL MINISTRIES

414-256-3241; esm@wels.net

The Organization of WELS Lutheran Seniors (OWLS) challenged seniors to “Finish the Race” well at its **annual convention for seniors** in Elkhart Lake, Wis., in October. The more than two hundred attendees heard keynote addresses and workshops as well as visited local sites, including the Road America race track (pictured). This year, the OWLS presented Military Services with a check for \$52,000 for WELS European Civilian chaplaincy, a group it has been supporting for more than a decade. The group also provided scholarships to four Martin Luther College students. The 2019 OWLS convention for seniors will be held in Galena, Ill. Learn more at wels.net/owls.



Treptow accepts call to be seminary president

On Oct. 1, Earle Treptow accepted the call to succeed Paul Wendland as president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., at the end of the 2018–19 school year. Treptow, the seminary’s vice president, joined the faculty in 2016. He teaches systematic theology and Old Testament.

“Prof. Earle Treptow is an experienced leader, an excellent scholar, and a gospel-hearted and humble man. He will make an outstanding president,” says Wendland.

Wendland, who joined the faculty in 2001 and has been serving as president since 2004, will remain at the seminary and transition to a teaching-only role.

“I’m grateful for this transition time,” notes Treptow. “I will have time to observe

a bit more carefully what the president is asked to do and to talk with him about why we do what we do. I have been trying to remind myself, though, that I have not been asked to replace Paul Wendland but to take over the duties he has carried out. There is only one Paul Wendland. The combination of his love for the

gospel, his intellect, his passion, and his zeal for missions have been a great blessing for the seminary and our synod.”

Jonathan Scharf, chairman of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Governing Board, agrees. “We thank President Wendland for his work leading the seminary,” says Scharf. “He has kept the seminary focused on its mission of preparing workers to serve God’s kingdom in the pastoral ministry. We’re also thankful to the Lord of the church that he’s given the seminary a man such as Prof. Treptow, whose many gifts will be a blessing to our church body as he serves as seminary president.”

For more information on Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, visit wls.wels.net.



Earle Treptow (right) will be serving as the new president for Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

District news

NORTHERN WISCONSIN

St. Mark, Eau Claire, Wis., constructed a bell tower from donations collected during the congregation's 50th anniversary in 2017. The 1,600-pound brass bell in the tower was cast in 1892 and recently refinished. The bell had been mounted on the ground since St. Mark purchased it in 1971.

SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN

On Sept. 9, **Good Shepherd, West Bend, Wis.,** dedicated its newly expanded space, which includes four classrooms, renovated bathrooms, and a welcome center.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

MI—New Salem, Sebawaing, Mich., celebrated its 165th anniversary on Sept. 23.

On Sept. 23, **St. John, Allegan, Mich.,** celebrated its 150th anniversary.

NA—Divine Word, Nepean, Ontario, Canada, celebrated its 40th anniversary on Oct. 21.

On Nov. 4, **Messiah, South Windsor, Conn.,** celebrated its 50th anniversary.

NE—Christ Our Redeemer, Aurora, Colo., celebrated its school's 50th anniversary on Oct. 14.

NW—Zion, Peshtigo, Wis., celebrated its 150th anniversary on Sept. 15.

SEW—Trinity, Waukesha, Wis., celebrated the service anniversaries of Pastor **Scott Oelhafen** (25 years) and Teacher **Tracey Inniger** (40 years) on Sept. 30.

On Oct. 5, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., celebrated the 25th anniversary in the pastoral ministry of **Earle Treptow**.

The district reporters for this month are: MI—John Eich; NA—Ian Headrick; NE—Timothy Kemnitz; NW—Dennis Kleist; SC—Andrew Retberg; SEW—Scott Oelhafen.

SOUTH CENTRAL



Atonement, Plano, Texas, dedicated its new sanctuary on Sept. 9.

SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN



On Sept. 10, these pastors gathered at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., for their 50th reunion.

SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN



St. John, Oak Creek (Oakwood), Wis., celebrated its 175th anniversary on Sept. 30.

GRACE

HMONG OUTREACH IN VIETNAM

The fields are ripe for the harvest in Vietnam, and through the gospel, the Holy Spirit is bringing many to faith.

Jonathan Bare as told to him by Wasa Lau

Translated by Bounkeo Lor

Pastor Wasa Lau is one of 60 Hmong Fellowship Church (HFC) leaders who are receiving theological training in Hanoi, Vietnam, from Bounkeo Lor, Hmong Asia ministry coordinator, and members of the Pastoral Studies Institute (PSI). Lau serves Immanuel 1997 church in Laichao province.

Here is more of his story of faith as told to Jonathan Bare, PSI team member, and Lor:

People in my area started becoming Christian already in 1993 when we heard radio broadcastings about Christianity. From 1993 to 1997, Christianity spread very quickly in our area. We heard that if you believed, you would be released from Shamanism and Satan—so within a short amount of time, the whole area believed. I believed in 1997.

PERSECUTION

One of my uncles served in the army. When he found out that we had become Christians, he was so angry. He brought many guns to our house, and he wanted to kill us. He also brought a big pot and was going to build a big fire and boil our whole family one by one for being Christian. But he drank a glass of alcohol and fell asleep at the table. Early in the morning, he woke up and left. So our family was spared.

In the end, they arrested the whole village. The local government forced us to make bricks, cut plants, and build houses. For one week we did hard labor for the government in our area. They brought us all together, and the local officials would point a gun at the leaders of the church. “If you don’t renounce your faith, we will kill you,” they threatened. But no one would renounce their faith. Since no one would renounce their faith, the government couldn’t do anything. They just put them in prison or sent them to do hard labor. I was a leader already at that time, but I wasn’t teaching the Bible yet, so they didn’t point a gun at my head. But I did get sent with the other leaders to do hard labor.

After they released all of us believers, we went back to our village. But the local government officials didn’t allow us to worship. So I remember we woke up at 1:00 in the morning to worship God. We couldn’t turn on any lights; we just used some oil lamps. We did that from 1997 to 2000.

EDUCATION

In 2005, I received some theological training from the Vietnamese Fellowship Church, and I passed my test in 2011. In 2011, they called me to serve Immanuel 1997 as pastor. There were some good things we learned in the training, but it was difficult because Vietnamese [the language they taught in] is not my first language. There were six courses we needed to study. They covered basics of salvation, faith, Baptism, and how to administer the church. Once you pass the test, you can be called as a pastor in the church.

But I needed more. I started receiving training from Pastor Lor in 2013. The first few years I still had a lot of confusion because the training I had received in the past was too limited. But in 2016, I finally understood Lutheran doctrine. Since that time, I have grown

in my ability to pass it on to my members and local leaders.

Currently, I serve 220 members in my church. I also oversee 7 pastors and 37 leaders who serve a total membership of 1,179. Our relationship was a struggle at first. Before the training from the Lutheran church, each of us had received training from other churches. Now, though, we have a very stable relationship because we all have the same training and doctrine. Now we don't allow other churches from the outside to provide training to our leaders or our churches. After I get back from the training session in Hanoi, two other students and I work together to provide training to all of our local leaders. We call together over one hundred local leaders for three, three-day training sessions to share the training we received in Hanoi.

One blessing is that in class we receive textbooks that we use to study the course with the professor. The textbook is in Hmong, so we can take it back and print more to use with the pastors and leaders we are training.

I had dreamed for such training for a long time. Many members would come and ask me to share the Word of God with them, but I didn't know how to do it. Since receiving training, I have grown in my confidence in what I believe and in sharing God's Word. I am certain of this: If the Lutheran church did not come to do the training, the Hmong congregations throughout Vietnam would have continued to suffer a lot due to theological differences.

My own ability is limited. I am not an educated person. But through the

training we are receiving, we have materials that we can review. Also, when we attend class, we can listen to the professors in person and ask questions about what we are learning. This has given me a lot more confidence. This has been a big change for me and for the congregations under my leadership. We've stopped searching for theological answers and materials from other churches. We know we have the truth now, and we know where to find it!

PRAYERS

The Hmong Fellowship Church has a large number of congregations, but we still lack many things—especially training for all of the leaders of these



Pastor Bounkeo Lor (seated, with black tie) explains concepts to Hmong pastors from the Hmong Fellowship Church during one of the training seminars. (Below) Pastor Wasa Lau studying at a WELS training seminar in Hanoi. Lau travels by motorcycle for half a day and by bus for a day to attend training. At 38 years old, he has been serving his church, Immanuel 1997, for 21 years, 13 as an elder and 8 as its pastor.



congregations. We need more training from the Lutheran church. That is what we are looking for now: for generation after generation to grow in the proper understanding of Scripture. That's what WELS can do for us.

I also ask that you pray for us. My congregation has a small building for worship. In the past, we had cut down a bunch of trees from the jungle for building a larger space, but someone came and burned all the wood. We're starting to go back to cut more wood to expand our building, but this project will take a lot of work and we don't have much money. Pray that the Lord will motivate our members to support it with their offerings so that we can expand the church in the future.

And more important, in my area many people are believers, but surrounding our area many are not Christian. We do not have the financial backing or a plan for reaching them. Some are donating money to send evangelists. Please pray that more of my members will support this effort so that we can continue to do more outreach in our area.

Jonathan Bare, part of the Pastoral Studies Institute team, is a member at Christ Alone, Thiensville, Wisconsin.



Since WELS began providing training to Hmong leaders in 2013, the HFC has grown from 55,000 to 100,000 members and has formed hundreds of new churches. The communist government now is offering WELS an opportunity to build a permanent facility in Hanoi for theological training. Learn more in this month's *WELS Connection* and at wels.net/vietnamhmongoutreach.



AMBASSADORS

HELP THEM SEE JESUS



So many need to hear about Jesus. Pray for them and for the opportunity to share Jesus with them.

Kenneth L. Brokmeier

“Prayer changes things!”

Go ahead! Google “phrases about prayer.” You quickly can find yourself immersed for hours sifting through the sites, uncovering little snippets about prayer. Some excerpts are authored by well-known believers like Martin Luther, and other quotes are by those who aren’t even Christian.

Prayer is an important part of our calling as Christ’s disciples. We pray because we are connected to Jesus. But like so many other facets of our Christian life, sometimes prayer can seem almost nonexistent . . . until crunch time. You know what I mean. Suddenly there is trouble! That’s when we take God’s invitation to call upon him (Psalm 50:15) rather seriously.

THOSE ON THE WRONG ROAD

Well, there is trouble out there right now. There is a whole world without Christ, and they are on the broad road that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13). Jesus knew it. He described them as harassed and helpless—sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36)—peo-

ple misled by the lies and philosophies of the world and, sometimes, even the church. Before his very eyes were souls who were still looking for answers because their own solutions always brought the same dead-end results. Jesus had compassion on them because they didn’t even realize their great need. They had numbed themselves into thinking that there is no God or that Jesus can’t be God’s answer.

The years and the faces may have changed, but the problem is still there. It’s not just on the other side of our planet but right in our own families, friends, and neighbors. It is on the campuses and classrooms of not just colleges but all levels of education. Do you see them? The sheep? Sheep who think they know better, even though they were once Jesus’ little lambs. Sheep who are wearing the glitter and glitz of their own self-righteousness. Sheep who think they have all the answers to life’s questions because of their education. Sheep who are quick to tell you to your face that you are foolish for following your Good Shepherd. Sheep. And all of them are unaware that they are lost because they don’t have the heavenly Shepherd named Jesus. What’s a person to do?

Listen to Jesus. Pray! That is what Jesus tells his disciples to do—pray. Literally beg the Lord to send out more workers.

OUR PRAYERS AS GOD’S AMBASSADORS

But wait! Are you ready for this? Jesus instructs his disciples to pray for more workers and then he sends those same disciples out as those workers (Matthew chapter 10). When we pray, he sends us out as his workers.

Knowing that we are the answer to our own prayer leads us to pray more fervently and zealously to the Lord, “Help!” And he does. We have examples from Scripture of ambassadors praying to the One they represent for help. Look at Daniel (chapter 6). Daniel knew the king’s decree that anyone who prayed—except to the king—would be thrown into the den of lions. Yet Daniel continued to pray to God three times a day, just as he had done before. I can imagine Daniel begging God to be with him so he could testify boldly when he stood before the king. God answered Daniel’s prayer.

Paul and Silas prayed (Acts 16:25). They had just been beaten and locked up, and yet they prayed and sang hymns. Can’t you just picture Paul begging God to open doors for the spread of the gospel? God answered Paul’s prayer. He not only opened the prison doors, but he also opened the heart of the jailer to believe in the Lord Jesus!

God also promises to answer our prayers as his ambassadors. So pray!





WHAT'S YOUR STORY

How have you shared Jesus? Every encounter is different, and we want to hear from you. To whom in your life did you reach out? What barriers did you have to overcome? For what did you pray dangerously, and how did God answer your prayer? E-mail responses to fic@wels.net with the subject line: "How I shared Jesus." Include your name, congregation, and contact information. Questions? Call 414-256-3231.

Ask boldly that God will give you wisdom so that you may know him better and trust his incomparably great power that is at work in you (cf. Ephesians 1:17-22).

When you pray, trust that God will keep his promises that he will never leave or forsake you (Matthew 28:20; Hebrews 13:5) when you are called upon to witness.

Pray dangerously. Challenge or beg that God would permit your life and the life of the one for whom you are praying to intersect so that you can be God's ambassador. Then look for God to open those doors to encounter others with whom you can share the news of Jesus. Most of all, be ready to walk through those doors when he opens them!

Pray with urgency. After all, billions are still in the state of spiritual darkness or unbelief. Scripture clearly teaches that if they remain and die in that state, their destiny is more than just darkness. It is the eternal misery, pain, and suffering of hell, where "the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched" (Isaiah 66:24).

OUR PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Sometimes that sense of urgency can wane, can't it? We don't always picture the mass of humanity on the other side of the world who are hellbound without Christ. After all, we are busy

with our lives of tweeting, texting, or updating our status on Facebook with the latest picture of what we deem to be important.

But then it hits us. A friend. Someone with whom we have broken bread at many meals. Someone with whom we went to Lutheran grade school and high school. Slowly they have stopped coming to church. Or they head off to college and we lose touch and, before you know it, they are caught in the web of ungodly philosophies.

Or it might be a family member—a parent, sibling, child, niece, or nephew. "What happened?" we ask ourselves. We might, humanly speaking, know the answer. But, more important, we know the solution: Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus!

So pray! Because "prayer changes things."

My family knows this to be true.

There were six children in my family growing up. We all had received the blessings of a Christian upbringing, including attending a Lutheran grade school and high school. But something happened, spiritually, with my brother. He made poor choices and drifted, slowly but surely, away from his Savior. Those who loved him—his parents, siblings, relatives, pastors, and teachers—spoke words of concern, warning him he was on that broad road. He would

often respond—sometimes saying the right things—but his actions were also speaking, unfortunately, louder than his words. The drifting continued.

Those who loved him prayed for him. We prayed boldly. We prayed dangerously. We prayed with urgency!

God answered . . . with an accident. An accident that suddenly found my brother teetering between life and death. An accident that would leave him needing care 24 hours per day for the nearly 16 years remaining in his life. But, most important, God answered our prayers with an accident that opened the heart of his blood-bought child to once more hear, believe, and completely trust that Jesus is the only Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6).

And so, as his ambassadors, we pray!

Ken Brokmeier is pastor at Our Savior's, Brookings, South Dakota.

This is the second article in a 12-part series on sharing your faith.





Light IN THE DARKNESS OF DOUBT

A woman's trust in God's plan for her is challenged by a difficult-to-diagnose disease.

Darla Nagel

I had no hope, no idea of what to do now. *Why are you letting this happen to me, God?*

I sat on my bed in my college-town apartment and let the tears loose. Holding them in seemed like a poor way to spend the energy I had left.

I'd just received a brief phone call from my dad. He passed along the results of a sleep study I'd had at the University of Michigan hospital. The sleep technicians had initially had a difficult time assessing my breathing with their equipment. My hopes soared; maybe sleep apnea was the cause of a host of debilitating symptoms I'd developed two years earlier, at age 19. I had been experiencing crushing and gradually worsening physical and cognitive exhaustion. It threatened my pursuit of a degree in English and of a career in publishing, possibly even Christian publishing.

The news was not good: the sleep study results had been negative. They could not find the cause.

THE DARKNESS

I can't take this. How is this going to be good for me? I was thinking of a usually comforting Bible verse framed in my bedroom at home: "For I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). I felt my frustration with the lack of a diagnosis. It began transforming into anger at God. I knew I'd regret that anger later, so I tried a different tack.

I grabbed the box of tissues out of the bathroom, blew my nose, and grabbed my journal to vent by writing all the questions I wanted answered. My head felt pressurized from trying to control my crying and streaming snot. I asked whether God really was perfect, really cared about me, and really would help me through this. I knew I surely didn't deserve his help, after all I was doubting and criticizing him.

For the next two days, anger at God darkened my thoughts. It didn't seem loving for him to allow me to hope about the sleep study and then not to give me any idea about where I should go to find a diagnosis. I feared that I'd never know what was wrong and end up bedridden.

While walking through God's beautiful autumn creation and gazing at it from the fourth floor of the college library reassured me of his perfection and power, I wasn't sure about his love. The love of Jesus in redeeming me was forgotten. If he didn't love me, I was heading for disaster in this life and in eternity. If a perfectly wise and powerful God wouldn't make a good plan for me, how could I make one with my limited intelligence and strength? That would be harder than assembling a puzzle while its picture was still being painted.

I didn't share what I was wondering about with anyone because this situation seemed between just God and me. But as hours passed, I sank into despair at the thought of handling life with a chronic illness.

THE LIGHT

I sat on my bed that Saturday evening, gazing at the greasy-haired, frowning girl in the mirrored sliding doors of the closet, because I couldn't do anything productive. Then it hit me—or God hit me with it. Jesus loves this girl in the mirror. If I couldn't trust him, I couldn't trust anyone or anything.

So I needed to trust him. I'd have nothing at all if I didn't have him. My

burden was too much for my family and me to bear alone. It was clear that I'd fallen into an inaccurate, negative thought pattern. Just because I thought that I'd never have a diagnosis and that no treatment option would succeed didn't make either true.

After a few more days and many prayers, I decided not to give up and decided to get a referral to Cleveland or Mayo Clinic. I scheduled an appointment with my primary care physician to get that referral.

The day of the appointment, my 22nd birthday, my prayers and my family's prayers for a diagnosis were answered. My doctor diagnosed me with the illness that deep down I'd suspected I had. Having a name sparked a surprisingly bright light of relief, given the condition's unpredictable prognosis. I have a multisystem disease that has no cure, no Food and Drug Administration–approved treatment, and about a dozen recognized specialists for more than a million patients nationwide: myalgic encephalomyelitis (pronounced my-ALL-jick en-SEEPH-uh-lo-MY-eh-light-is). It's also called by the wimpy name “chronic fatigue syndrome.”

LIGHT SHARED

I continued my college studies, trying treatment after treatment that failed or even intensified some of my symptoms. As my physical health worsened, my mom's spiritual health also worsened.

One day, two weeks before my graduation, she saw me suddenly sit down in exhaustion. She sat down next to me and said, “I've prayed and prayed about you, but God doesn't do anything. A perfect God wouldn't do this to you.” She seemed to forget about Jesus too.

Mom had brought me up in the Lutheran faith and for two years had been my Sunday school teacher. To hear her doubt God's perfection was worrisome and shocking enough to keep my brain from generating a re-

sponse—until I remembered doubting God after hearing the sleep study results. Then I knew what I could say that might help her.

“There was a time when I doubted that God loved me,” I began. “I finally realized that if I can't trust him, I can't trust anything or anyone. I'd have nothing at all if I didn't have God. Life would be completely pointless and hopeless.”

Mom sighed. “I suppose.”

At a time when my disease often scrambled my words or made my mind go blank when I needed to make a decision or a response promptly, the words my mom needed flowed. The words and the delivery maybe weren't perfect, but both were guided from above.

I didn't know that many dark days were yet to come—days when I couldn't stand up unassisted to greet my parents when they came home from work. We waited and prayed for a brighter future.

Six years have now passed since I shared my epiphany with my mom. I have the blessings of a job that uses my English degree, a Christian myalgic encephalomyelitis specialist within driving distance, and an inexpensive off-label drug that completely lifts the fog of my cognitive exhaustion and somewhat lightens the physical exhaustion.

Shadows remain: The job could be lost, the specialist could retire, and the drug could stop working. There's nothing like illness to remind us of the imperfections of our bodies and nothing like doubt to remind us of the imperfections of our understanding of God. I still face the darkness of an uncertain future with my chronic illness, but I trust that my Lord not only holds but also is the light my family and I need.

Darla Nagel is a member at Emanuel, Flint, Michigan.

This article is adapted from Nagel's memoir, *Lightening the Shadow: Diagnosing and Living with an Invisible Chronic Illness*.

What if your Christmas isn't so silent?

Glenn T. Schwanke

What about
when it comes
to silencing the
inner alarms?
I humbly defer
to the Child.

We had just finished our Christmas Eve service, and the familiar words of the closing hymn, "Silent Night," were still echoing in my mind. "Silent night, holy night, all is calm." As I glanced out our chapel's window, I smiled as I saw the light, fluffy snow falling idyllically, as if our Lord was laying a thick, white blanket over the Copper Country and hushing nature itself. Moved by the moment, I stood to make the final announcements.

"Isn't Christmas here amazing? If snow is what makes your Christmas special, we have plenty of that! And with Michigan Tech on Christmas break and so many of our businesses closed for the holiday, those of us still in town can concentrate on the real meaning of Christmas—the Son born of the virgin Mary and laid in the manger. All because it's so qui . . ."

I never got to finish that last word, for just then our chapel was flooded by ear-piercing blasts from our fire alarm! It went off because a young boy was fascinated by the big, red fire alarm handle located in the back of our chapel. It said, "Pull Down." So he did.

What followed was chaos. As the siren blared, the members looked to the pastor, expecting him to know how to silence it. But they soon learned their pastor must have snoozed through the Practical Theology class at the seminary that was devoted to fire alarms. So the siren continued its assault. Thankfully, one of the worshipers, the county sheriff, had called the fire department to report a false alarm. Finally, after everyone's eardrums were on the edge of bleeding, we found the alarm manual and silenced the system.

So much for a silent night.

What will your Christmas celebration be like this year? Maybe not so silent because there are alarms thundering deep inside you that cause you to toss and turn every night. Maybe an alarm

pulled by the fear that your marriage seems to be heading toward the rocks? A parent-child relationship stretched to the breaking point? A faltering business or a career careening into the ditch?

Maybe your inner alarm can't be silenced because this Christmas seems far too quiet, especially late in the evening when your home feels so empty and cavernous. All because your lifelong spouse went home to heaven this year.

Maybe your inner alarm has been pulled by worry over a loved one serving in the Armed Forces, far away from home this Christmas season. Some 450,000 US troops serve overseas, and some are stationed in hot spots like Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kuwait.

I claim no expertise in silencing fire alarm systems in our chapel at Peace. So I defer to the experts. What about when it comes to silencing the inner alarms? I humbly defer to the Child. Isaiah gives us this unforgettable guarantee: "Every boot that marched in battle and the garments rolled in blood will be burned. They will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born. To us a son is given. The authority to rule will rest on his shoulders. He will be named: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no limit to his authority and no end to the peace he brings" (Isaiah 9:5-7 Evangelical Heritage Version).

I pray you and yours are blessed with a calm, silent night this Christmas, one marked by the true peace the Child came to bring.

Contributing editor Glenn Schwanke, pastor at Peace, Houghton, Michigan, also serves as campus pastor at Michigan Technological University.

MAJORING ON THE MINORS

Thomas D. Kock

ZECHARIAH: “MERRY CHRISTMAS, WITH LOVE”

As he stared into the mirror, he hated what he saw. Memories of what had happened flooded his mind. It was what he had done. How could he?!? He knew it was wrong. He KNEW it!

And now? The guilt was horrible!

A REFLECTION OF GUILT

Oh, it hadn't started out that way. The temptation had sounded so good! It was as if Satan was whispering pleasantly into his ears: “Oh, try it! It will feel great! You'll be so much happier, so much more fulfilled if you try it.” The “voice” was smooth and enticing.

Once he did it, the same voice berated him. “You jerk! You knew it was wrong, but you did it anyway. You must be the worst ever! How could you?!?” He heard that voice over and over as he stared into the mirror.

Maybe that was the voice which was playing in Joshua's ears. No, this isn't the Joshua who fought the battle of Jericho. This Joshua was the high priest at the time of Zechariah and Haggai. Zechariah recorded the vision given by the Lord: “Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him” (3:1). That's what Satan does—he accuses. In fact, *Satan* means “accuser.”

And he's really good at it! His ultimate goal is to lead us away from God forever. After he woos us into temptation, he turns around and points his finger at us and says, “You! How could you?!? You horrid, horrible person!”

In the vision, Zechariah saw Joshua, the high priest “dressed in filthy clothes.” He was guilty.

A REFLECTION OF FORGIVENESS

We're thrilled to hear what happens next: “The angel said . . . , ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.’ . . . So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by” (3:4,5). In a visual way, God showed the glory of forgiveness by immaculately re-clothing Joshua.

God has re-clothed you too. God has taken away your sin. In his eyes, you're re-clothed in glorious finery. And so when you look into the mirror, you no longer have to cringe because of the sins committed the day/week/year before; God has forgiven them all!

Oh, but don't take sin lightly. God is serious about sin. When we sin, we spit in God's face. Do NOT play with sin!

But God promises, “See, I have taken away your sin!” Jesus came to this earth to pay for your sins and to win perfection for you. He did it! That gives us the reason to love God and avoid sin.

So look in that mirror. Do so with joy. See a forgiven person, someone who glows where it matters most—in the eyes of God.

Merry Christmas, with love!

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

This is the 11th article in a 12-part series on the minor prophets.

HOSEA

JOEL

JONAH

AMOS

OBADIAH

MICAH

NAHUM

HABAKKUK

ZEPHANIAH

HAGGAI

ZECHARIAH

Lineage: A prophet, son of Berechiah, grandson of Iddo. A priest named Iddo is named in Nehemiah 12:4. Is he the same Iddo? If so, Zechariah is also a priest.

Date of writing: Late October or early November, 520 B.C. to December, 518 B.C. (Haggai is a contemporary.)

Unique fact: Amazing oracles with vivid imagery. Quoted often in the New Testament.

Key verse: Multiple prophecies of Jesus' passion: 9:9 (Palm Sunday); 11:12,13 (Judas' betrayal); 12:10 (Jesus' crucifixion); 13:7 (the disciples being scattered).

MALACHI



Do we need Jesus?
God thought so
and sent Jesus.

No need?

Ads for the Christmas shopping season appear early. I think I got the first one in September. If someone would suggest that we have no need for Christmas, retailers would get in line to object. Perhaps the only people who would eliminate Christmas are those opposed to the reason for Christmas—the birth of Jesus. Maybe it would be Hindus, Muslims, atheists, and others around the world who see no need for Jesus.

Most who experience Christmas would retain the lights, the tree, the family gatherings, the presents, and perhaps even the solemn quiet of “Silent Night” or the warmth of little children singing “Away in a Manger.” Many would retain those pleasures as their personal annual celebration. Yes, there’s a need for such a Christmas. Just ask almost anyone.

Dig a little deeper and ask if they have found a need for Jesus in their lives, not just a need to celebrate his birth. Perhaps they might understand the need to keep Jesus in Christmas, although they might think more about Santa, Frosty, or Rudolph. And yet Jesus would disappear for another year as fast as Rudolph.

We love to celebrate the birth of a newborn. Jesus is no exception. He’s a special child. But what about Jesus, the Savior, the full-grown man who “is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3)? Do we need him? Absolutely!

Look at the news any day of the year—shootings, drunkenness, perversion, fraud, greed, and so much more. I’m guilty of walking away from the television when the news is bad—which is all too frequently—but it’s only a temporary journey. The bad news will find me, or I will be drawn back to it after my brief protest. I can’t change any of it. Do we need Jesus? Yes.

The bad news reminds me that God cared enough—loved enough—to send his Son, Jesus, here. Jesus did not live in a quaint, nostalgic world without trouble. Drunkenness, perversion, fraud,

greed, and bloodshed—although not by automatic weapons—are as old as history. This disturbing world with all its faults is not what God wanted; it’s what we have made it. Jesus has come that we should not perish in the mire and muck but have everlasting life in his Father’s house (John 14:2).

In the daily schedules of life, we concentrate on what is close and familiar—the job, the family, the finances, the house. All those things demand our attention every day. We busy ourselves with these things and consider ourselves fortunate to avoid trouble and often stop there. Our everyday life is like a little castle with walls of ordinary concerns that keep out the bad stuff, most of the time. We conclude we don’t need Jesus in our personal castles.

Perhaps that’s because we don’t notice how things change. The children slowly grow older and move away to start their own families. We see them less because they live in their own castles now. And slowly our own lives change. Our parents first had difficulty coming to family gatherings at Christmas, then they can’t come, and finally they are gone. The pattern repeats in each generation, and we can’t change it. Do we need Jesus?

But I shouldn’t look at everyone else. My own life is not free from faults and mistakes either. No one’s is. I am not, nor is anyone I know, innocent. I deserve to be abandoned by a holy God. Everyone deserves the same verdict.

Do we need Jesus? God thought so and sent Jesus. His love and forgiveness give us hope, joy, and peace.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

COMFORT IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT: REVELATION 1

Timothy J. Westendorf

INTRODUCTION

The title is one of the opening words of the book. “Revelation” is an accurate and helpful translation of the Greek word that is also rendered “Apocalypse.” Immediately we hear that the book’s ultimate author is Jesus Christ, who gives it to show (make known, reveal) what is going to take place. His intended audience is “his servants,” those who already know him and listen to his voice.

As always, when Jesus speaks, he does so not to confuse and discourage but to comfort and encourage his flock. Although his words are sometimes difficult to understand, we remember that these words are spoken by our Savior. He has spoken to us before. We look to other words he has given us, remembering that he is our Good Shepherd. He speaks in order to lead and guide us. We trust that he won’t tell us anything in this revelation that goes against other very clear words that he has revealed to us in the Bible.

We’ll approach our study with humility, asking the Holy Spirit to reveal his truth to our hearts. These words are from God himself, through Jesus Christ, given by an angel to John, the disciple whom Jesus loved.

CONFLICT

That’s important to remember! Like John, all those who hear these words are loved

by the One who speaks. That’s important to remember because it wouldn’t have looked like that at first glance. It may not have felt like that to John and his fellow first-century believers. It sometimes does not look or feel that way for 21st-century Christians either.

John was in exile. He was on an island . . . literally. He had been forcibly removed from family and friends, congregation and comforts, to Patmos. Because of his faith in Jesus and his faithfulness in proclaiming the good news of Jesus, he was punished.

The year was likely A.D. 95. The Roman Emperor Domitian was leading an active and often brutal persecution of the Christians in his empire. There was conflict for the church. They might have been asking, “Does God love us? Does he care about us? Are we precious in his sight? Are we sons and daughters of the Great King? Will he come for us?”

COMFORT

The church is his bride and needed to hear from her Bridegroom. She needed assurances that he was still in charge. She needed reminders of his real and unfailing love. She needed to hear that she was his precious possession and that she possessed all that was rightfully his. She needed his comfort in the midst of conflict. And that is what he graciously and generously gives her.

We need to hear his voice too. We need comfort in the midst of our conflicts. Our prayer is that we would hear just that as we study this beautiful Revelation of Jesus.

REFLECT ON REVELATION CHAPTER 1

1. Read vv. 4-8. How does God comfort us in these verses? Compare these verses with 1 Peter 1:1-12; 2:9,10.
2. Read vv. 9-20. In what ways is the vision of Jesus both frightening and comforting? (Note John’s reaction and Jesus’ words in verse 17.)
3. Reread v. 20. Explain the comfort you can have from the vision of Jesus walking among the lampstands holding the stars in his hands. (Note: The lampstands are the churches, and the stars are the angels or messengers of the gospel.)

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



This is the first article in a 12-part series on the book of Revelation. Find the article and answers online after Dec. 5 at wels.net/forwardinchrist. Read more about Westendorf, our newest contributing editor, on p. 23.

Christmas can be a dark time. We need to share the light of Jesus so all can see what their Savior has done for them.

Nathan W. Strutz

Christmas. The day is supposed to be filled with such happiness. Who doesn't love gathering with family? Who doesn't love seeing a tree with presents that fill the living room?

A TIME OF DARKNESS

Maybe you don't. Maybe your family is not a happy gathering. Grandma's place at the table is dark because Grandma isn't there anymore. Your nephew Jimmy will be there, but not with the wife and kids after their recent divorce. Uncle Joe hasn't come in years, because he's been estranged so long. Maybe there isn't a room full of presents.

Instead, there's a heart full of fear, a darkness that there won't be enough money to pay the bills. Maybe the lights don't brighten your heart because all you can see is darkness.

Sadness spikes in the wintertime. Suicide rates go up around the holidays.

Too many think, I'm supposed to be so happy, but I'm not. I've done my share to make the family gatherings awkward and haven't done anything to reach out to Uncle Joe. Maybe it's my fault. I could have worked harder and been nicer to the boss. Then money wouldn't be so tight. If I had just made better choices, just worked a little harder at being happy, I could really enjoy Christmas.

JESUS IS THE LIGHT

There is hope. Jesus is the light for that darkness, especially at Christmas. He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Jesus brings light to lighten your eyes beyond your earthly troubles. Jesus loved you so much he made you part of his perfect family. The holy God is your Father, loving you so much he sent his Son into a manger, to a cross, and to rise from the dead to give you the light of life. Jesus is your perfect brother, the brother who took all the blame for all your sins. What other brother would do that? Jesus did! Jesus, our perfect brother, piled all the darkness for all the guilt of everyone on himself. That means your guilt is gone. Your darkness has become light.

Jesus provided your greatest need: forgiveness. Jesus will take care of all your other needs as well.

Jesus has given you a heavenly mansion, monogrammed with your initials, already waiting for you. He signed it with his blood, sealed it with his empty tomb, and delivers it to you in water and his Word: "You are baptized! You are my child!"

WE MUST SHARE THE LIGHT

This light needs to be shared. Just as the shepherds shared it on the first Christmas, just as a parent or friend shared the light with you, so you get to share this light with others. Who wouldn't like to hear, "Your guilt is gone!"? Who wouldn't love to hear, "Your sins are forgiven!"?

We've set a goal as a church body to reach one million people this Christmas with the good news of great joy that is for all the people: A Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord. One million sounds like a lot of people. But 35,000 people get this magazine. They—you—are today's shepherds. I encourage all of you to do what the shepherds at Bethlehem did: "Spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child" (Luke 2:17). If each one of you would share the light of Jesus with ten neighbors, friends, or relatives, we would be on our way to reaching one million.

What a merry Christmas that would be!

Nathan Strutz is pastor at Resurrection, Verona, Wisconsin.

Learn more about the goal to reach one million people with the gospel message this Christmas at wels.net/c18.



LET GOD'S *light shine*