

Forward in Christ

A LUTHERAN VOICE



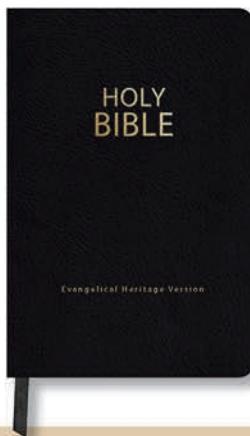
The Word became flesh

The same Word that brought all things into existence
came to earth on Christmas to dwell with us. Page 10

'Tis His Season



We put stars and angels atop our Christmas trees. We re-create manger scenes at our churches. We sing carols about that first Christmas night. In these ways and more, we say, "'Tis His season!" The books you read and the gifts you give from Northwestern Publishing House also reflect this truth.



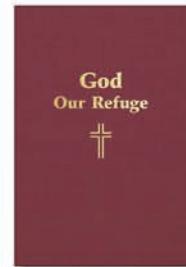
HOLY BIBLE: EVANGELICAL HERITAGE VERSION (EHV) GIFT EDITION

The new EHV translation—available in this special Gift Edition—proclaims the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The expressions, imagery, and style of the original texts are present, giving readers an enduring picture of God's awesome love. In addition to the stunning cover, the gilded page edges and black ribbon marker set this edition apart as a timeless Christmas present for friends and family members. Bonded leather cover; 1,835 pages.

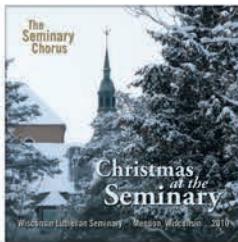
LU0105003, \$59.99

EHV Hardcover Edition also available! LU0105000, \$22.99

GOD OUR REFUGE



Devotions, meditations, gospel readings, prayers, hymns, and other spiritual treasures fill *God Our Refuge*. This pocket companion serves all who look to the triune God for daily strength on their way toward heaven. Originally published to lend spiritual support to the men and women in the military forces of our nation, this edition of *God Our Refuge* continues to serve that need as well. Softcover, 147 pages. **LU0600765, \$3.99**



CHRISTMAS AT THE SEMINARY

Enjoy moving renditions of treasured Advent and Christmas anthems by the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Chorus with their 2010 collection *Christmas at the Seminary*. Classic hymns like "Silent Night" and "Now Sing We, Now Rejoice," modern tunes like "Mary, Did You Know?," and many more are sure to become favorites of yours and your loved ones at Christmastime. CD, 21 tracks. **LU348992, \$12.98**

Also available as an e-book from amazon.com/kindle or barnesandnoble.com/nook!



STAR FROM AFAR WOODEN NATIVITY GIFT SET

Begin a new Christmas tradition with this 11-piece wooden nativity set for kids. Every day, families will search for the hidden star, just as the wise men did. This daily journey will remind children to keep following Jesus during the Christmas season. Help young believers celebrate and learn about the miracle of the nativity with the Star From Afar Wooden Nativity Gift Set. It includes a 29-page hardcover book. **LU4501204, \$62.99**

For more seasonal books and gifts, visit www.nph.net or call 800-662-6022.

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



**NORTHWESTERN
PUBLISHING HOUSE**

www.nph.net

**NPH
EXTRA
PROGRAM**

Find us on Facebook



FEATURES

10

The Word became flesh

God reveals a stunning, glorious, and gracious truth for us all at Christmas.

Paul E. Zell

12

What I learned by answering questions

After six years, the author of "Light for our path" shares his insights.

James F. Pope

14

Confessions of faith

A long journey ends with faith in Jesus and a desire to serve him.

Amanda M. Klemp

16

Heart to heart

How can we nurture a proper view of "stuff"?

26

Don't forget Advent

In the midst of chaos, Advent points us to what is important.

Stephen M. Luchterhand

28

For the Lord's glory

The new hymnal encourages a new generation to sing the gospel.

Aaron L. Christie

30

Recovered in Christ

A former addict finds healing in the promises of God's Word.

Rachel M. Hartman

35

Christmas really happened

The gospels tell the truth of a birth that really matters.

Jeffrey L. Samelson



Love IN Action

*Showing God's love to those with
special needs or in special circumstances*

wels.net/special-ministries



WELS Special Ministries helps you put love in action

Order your free copy of the Love in Action booklet to learn more about the eight areas of WELS Special Ministries:

- Visually Impaired
- Care for Called Workers
- Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Mental Health
- Health and Wellness
- Prison Ministry
- Military Services

To order, contact WELS Special Ministries at
specialministries@wels.net or 414-256-3241.



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 WRITERS

Nicole R. Balza
 Dayton Hamann

SEMINARY CONSULTANT

Prof. Samuel Degner

DESIGNER

Carianne Ciriacks

COPYRIGHT

©2019 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, N16W23379 Stone Ridge Dr, Waukesha WI 53188-1108.

Forward in Christ (ISSN 1541-8936) is published monthly through Northwestern Publishing House, N16W23379 Stone Ridge Dr, Waukesha WI 53188-1108. 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, N16W23379 Stone Ridge Dr, Waukesha WI 53188-1108; 800-662-6093. Milwaukee area, 414-475-6600. 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: LIGHTSTOCK

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

December can so often be a time of busyness—what with the shopping, wrapping, baking, cleaning, and decorating that we all do to get ready for the holidays. With so much going on, we can forget about what's really important—our Savior's birth.

So take time this month to be still and contemplate the meaning of the Word made flesh (pp. 10 & 33). Light Advent candles as you prepare for the first and second coming of your Lord (pp. 8 & 26). Remind your family that “stuff”—at Christmas and all year around—shouldn’t be the focus (p. 14). And be ready to share the true story of Christmas and of a birth that really matters (p. 35).

Though I am telling you to slow down, I have to admit that we at *Forward in Christ* have been pretty busy. We’re bringing you a brand-new redesigned magazine next month. Check out the back cover to whet your appetite. We’re so excited to share what’s coming, including a new look, new features, and a new website. But don’t be too eager. Your January 2020 issue will be a little later than usual. Look for it the last week of December.

And don’t worry. We haven’t forgotten what’s really important either—a message centered on our Savior and what he did for us and all sinners.

Julie Wietzke



12



21



30



33

IN EVERY ISSUE

6 | Feedback

Readers share their opinions

7 | Devotion

God loves the doubters

8 | From the president's desk

Focus on what is ahead

9 | Light for our path

Does God hate us?

18 | Teen talk

Walking on a tightrope

19 | Bulletin board

Announcements from around the synod

20 | News

What's happening in WELS

32 | Editorial comment

“All I want for Christmas . . .”

33 | Bible study

The incarnation of our Lord

34 | A thought

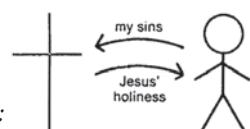
Heirs of heaven

GOD'S GREAT EXCHANGE ILLUSTRATION

Re: "How I shared Jesus" [Sept., p. 6]. I was hoping to see an illustration of David Rosenbaum's stick figure and cross next to his story, so I could use it myself!

Ruth Kovaciny

The drawing may have looked something like this:



This drawing was taken from "God's Great Exchange," a training manual from WELS Evangelism that explains how to do this simple law-gospel presentation. Illustrated brochures and the manual are still available to order from Northwestern Publishing House, nph.net; 800-662-6022.—ed.

Through my Bible in 3 years

Read or listen online at wels.net/bible3.

2019
DECEMBER 2019

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

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. Letters are edited for clarity, conciseness, and relevance. Writers' views are not necessarily those of WELS or *Forward in Christ*.

WELS Mission Journeys

The official WELS program for short-term mission trips

Engage in Christian service. Get involved in outreach.
Experience work in a mission field firsthand.

Want to learn more about how you and your congregation can get involved?
Visit wels.net/missionjourneys.

God loves the doubters

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

John 20:26,27

Joel C. Seifert

We say, "Seeing is believing," as though somehow if we can just see some proof, then all doubt disappears. It wasn't that way for Thomas.

DOUBT OFTEN COMES FROM WHAT WE DO SEE

You know the Easter account. The risen Christ appeared to his disciples, but Thomas wasn't there. He didn't see, so he didn't believe, right? But consider what Thomas had seen. He saw Jesus walk on water. He saw Jesus heal the sick. He saw Jesus raise the dead.

But then he saw Jesus die. And he doubted.

It's amazing how powerful doubt can be, even for people who have seen so much of God's love. When the disciples told Thomas they'd seen the Lord, he didn't just struggle with a nagging doubt. It was a full-throated, "God, if you're expecting me to believe, you need to show me what I want to see."

Sometimes we doubt that way too. God shows us constant proofs of his love and the truth of his Word. We see it! But it's not all we see: I believed in God until I saw war . . . until my grandpa died . . . until my mom got cancer. We see proofs of faith, but we see evil too.

In a strange way, Thomas is an important example of doubt. He was honest about it. That was just the right thing to do.

JESUS WANTS US TO TAKE OUR DOUBT TO HIM

Doubt is painful, sinful, and yet quite natural to our human hearts. It scares

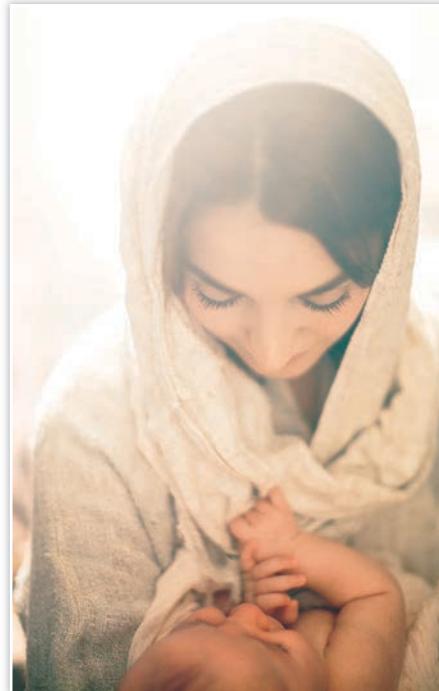
us, but it doesn't scare Jesus. He loves the doubters. He didn't yell at Thomas or avoid his doubts. Jesus brought Thomas closer. He invited him to touch him.

Do you doubt? Do you doubt in ways that make you want to stay away? Or even in little ways that steal your joy? Confess that sin to Jesus; bring it to him and hear him say something you don't expect. He isn't afraid of your doubts. He'll bring you even closer.

Doubt is painful,
sinful, and yet quite
natural to our
human hearts.
It scares us, but it
doesn't scare Jesus.

Christmas is almost here. It's a time to read about Mary holding Jesus in her arms, not Thomas putting his fingers into Jesus' hands and side. But for hundreds of years, Dec. 21 has been set aside to remember Thomas and think about God's love for the doubters. Dec. 21 is often the shortest day of the year. It's the day with the least amount of light—the day that's hardest to see things for what they are. It's a good picture of doubt. And if you're sitting in the darkness of the winter solstice, do you know what you can be sure of every day to come? It'll be brighter.

Sometimes God brings the greatest hope out of doubt. Whenever you



struggle, take your doubts to Jesus. Let your fingers run over the pages of his promises. Realize he's as close to you as your hands or your mouth in Holy Communion. His grace is dripping down your head in Baptism. He comes as a child at Christmas. That's what we see—and he opens our hearts to say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

Keep going back to God's promises. Things get brighter.

Contributing editor Joel Seifert is pastor at Beautiful Savior, Marietta, Georgia.



Mark Schneider

The first Sunday
in Advent helps
us to see clearly
the final result
of the work Jesus
was born to do.

Focus on what is ahead

People who are nearsighted can see clearly what is right in front of their eyes. But when objects are farther away, they get blurry and out of focus. So nearsighted people need to wear glasses or contact lenses to bring their vision into focus.

The season of Advent is a time for us to focus spiritually. In our worship services during Advent, we are directed to focus on Savior's first coming in Bethlehem. Despite the many distractions that our culture throws at us during the Advent season, we as believers are always eager and happy to fix our eyes on what the season is really about—the celebration of the Savior's birth.

After thousands of years of waiting by God's people, the long-promised Messiah had finally come. The life and ministry of Jesus that followed fulfilled other prophecies well known to God's Old Testament people: the beginning of his ministry, described in prophecy as the time when "the people walking in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2); the One identified by John as the great Passover "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29); the lowly King, prophesied by Zechariah, who entered Jerusalem "lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9:9). This was the Savior whose suffering and death were described by Isaiah so graphically that it seems that he was witnessing the scene in person: "We considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4,5). This was the living and victorious Savior confessed by Job when he sang, "I know that my redeemer lives" (19:25).

We might be surprised to learn that the emphasis and theme of the first Sunday of Advent have nothing to do

with the first coming of Jesus two thousand years ago. Rather, that first Sunday in Advent directs our attention to his second coming. The last section of the prayer for Advent in our hymnal highlights this unexpected emphasis:

Direct our eyes not only to the manger but to the skies, where we will see your Son coming again, not as a lowly child, but as the Lord of lords. Lift up our hearts in joyful anticipation of that day. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, in your grace, in your power, and in your glory. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Christian Worship, p. 123.

Like a badly needed pair of glasses for a nearsighted person, the first Sunday in Advent helps us to see clearly the final result of the work Jesus was born to do. As the Scriptures so clearly foretold, the Savior came to live and die and rise again for us. Those promises were kept without exception. But one promise still remains: Jesus will come again.

Unlike his first coming in lowliness and humility, the second coming of Jesus will be a victorious and joyful return. We know that it will happen. But we don't know when.

Because we don't know when Jesus will come, we can easily lose sight of that promise. We can become spiritually nearsighted. We end up losing sight of the promise still to be experienced.

The season of Advent, by its initial emphasis on Jesus' final return, begins by focusing our attention on that glorious day when we will see our Savior with our own eyes and experience in person the end result of what he first came to do.

So, focus with joy and with hope on Bethlehem . . . and beyond.

Light for our path

My friend believes that God hates us. He argues that God hates sin, and we are sinful; therefore, God hates us to the core of our being. I pointed out John 3:16 to him, but he said the context means something other than "God is love." Does God actually hate us?

James F. Pope

We find the answer to your question by examining the two major teachings of the Bible: the law and the gospel.

HATRED OF SINNERS

Chances are, you have heard people comment that "God hates the sin but loves the sinner." No doubt, people who make that statement have good intentions. They likely desire to keep a balance between God's law and gospel.

Rather than striking a balance though, that expression waters down the message of the law. The uncomfortable and horrific truth of God's law is that God hates sin and sinners. The Bible says of God: "You hate all who do wrong" (Psalm 5:5). According to his law, God does not separate sin from the sinner. With his law, God thunders his anger at people who fall short of the perfection he demands (Leviticus 19:2; Matthew 5:48).

LOVE OF SINNERS

While the law speaks of God's hatred of sinners, the gospel presents an entirely different message: God loves sinners. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). His love is undeserved; it cannot be earned. At Christmas we celebrate the coming of God's Son for sinners. The message of the gospel details how God loved sinners with actions and not mere words. Jesus came to live (1 Peter 2:22) and die (Romans 5:6,8) in place of sinners.

The content of the law and the gospel is not contradictory. These two central teachings of the Bible reveal different information about God. One teaching expresses God's justice and his hatred for sin and sinners; the other teaching brings to light God's gracious and genuine love for sinners.

We see the intersection of those two doctrines at the cross of Calvary. There, God punished Jesus in the place of all sinners, sparing them the punishment they deserved (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 John 4:10).

PEOPLE OF GRACE

So what do these two different messages of Scripture mean for Christians? Does God hate them or love them? Thankfully, the Bible does not leave Christians in suspense. In his inspired letter to the Christians in Rome, the apostle Paul served as God's spokesperson when he pointed to "this grace in which we now stand" (Romans 5:2). Christians are people of grace; they trust God's grace in Jesus. Each day, we bask in the sunshine of his grace. We face each morning with fresh confidence that we are the recipients of God's grace and mercy (Lamentations 3:22,23). We close our eyes in sleep, knowing that we are safe and secure through God's grace (Psalm 4:8).

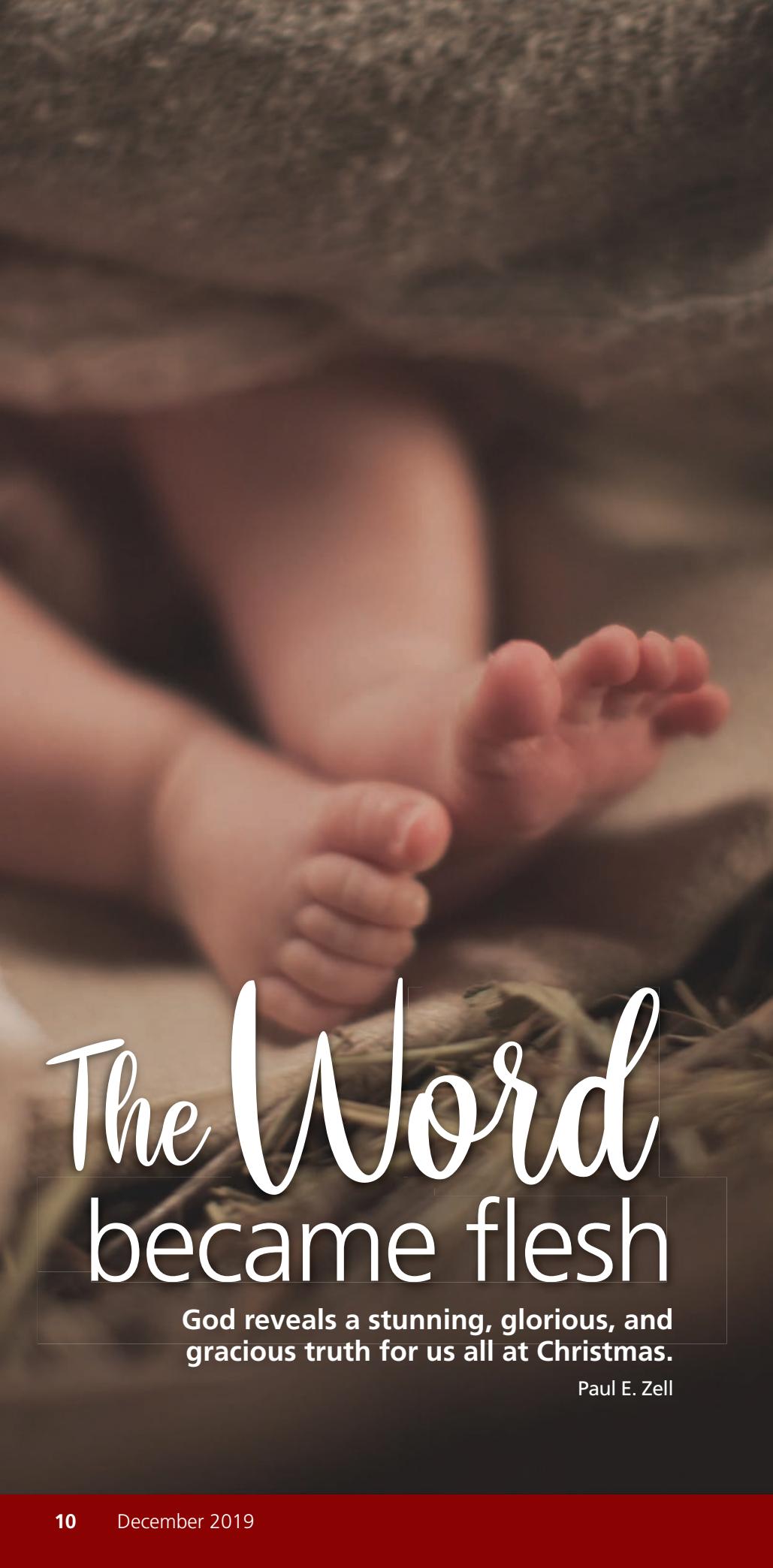
God's gospel appropriately dominates our lives as Christians, but does that mean there is no place for God's law in our lives? Certainly not. With the context of your question in mind, our rebellious sinful nature still needs to hear the harsh message of God's law. The law's pronouncement of God's hatred of sin and sinners serves as a warning for Christians not to reject salvation by impenitence and unbelief.

As people of grace, Christians live with the knowledge that their natural sinfulness and actual sins deserve God's punishment, but God has completely forgiven their sins and now views them as his dearly loved children (1 John 3:1).

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

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

Psalm 119:105



The Word became flesh

God reveals a stunning, glorious, and gracious truth for us all at Christmas.

Paul E. Zell

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

How so? Open Holy Scripture to the first chapter. The answer is obvious. Repeatedly. "God said . . . God said . . . God said . . ." The expression appears ten times in that opening chapter. In the beginning the Word called light into being and separated it from the primordial darkness. The Word separated the waters from the dry ground. The Word covered the earth with abundant vegetation. The Word called into existence the light-bearing bodies of the sky. The Word created the living creatures that fill the sea and the sky and the land. The Word fashioned our first parents.

A STUNNING TRUTH

Some are tempted to skip that first chapter of the Bible—for good reason, humanly speaking. Simply put, it's too much. The stunning truth the Word declares is far greater than our capacity to understand or explain. The infinite wisdom of the Word overwhelms. The surpassing power of the Word terrifies. If all things were made through his Word, what is the Word going to say to fallen creatures who often fail to acknowledge him and misuse what he has made?

At the start of the gospel according to St. John, the evangelist echoes Genesis chapter 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." So the Word is not merely expressions emerging from the mouth, resonating between the ears, or lining up before the eyes. In the beginning the Word was God, and at the same time the Word was face-to-face with God.

"Through him all things were made" (John 1:3). All things? Indeed. "Without him," the evangelist announces, "nothing was made that has been made."

Like stars that sparkled in the sky while shepherds kept watch over their flocks at night. In the beginning

the Word had called every one of those stars into existence.

Like the angel who spoke to frightened shepherds. Like the vast heavenly host who joined the angel, giving glory to God. In the beginning the Word had created every one of them.

Like the pagan emperor who decreed a census. Like the faithful citizen who went to the town where he was to register. Like the highly favored virgin who gave birth. The Word had formed each of them.

The omniscient Word. The omnipresent Word. The omnipotent Word. The everlasting Word. Those “big words” learned from catechism instruction attempt to articulate realities beyond the capacity of the human intellect.

A GLORIOUS TRUTH

“Eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made.” Believers everywhere confess this glorious truth in the Nicene Creed, though none can fully comprehend it.

Then the inspired evangelist proclaims a truth even more glorious. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). St. John’s word choice would have prompted his fellow Jews to recall the tabernacle from centuries earlier, how God “tent” among his people as he led them to the Promised Land. God was always present with the Israelites during their exodus.

Yet this is so much more. The omniscient Son of God appeared in the flesh as the son of Mary. The omnipresent Deity was held fast in his mother’s arms, nursed at her breast, laid to sleep in a feedbox. The omnipotent Word took on the flesh of an infant unable to form words of his own. The Son of God remained God. The Son of God became a child.

Ordinarily, a newborn is the focus

of adoring scrutiny. Grandma’s heart melts over the tiny fingers and toes and ears. Older siblings beg to caress the ever-so-soft arms and legs. Doting parents gaze at their little one’s face for hours at a time. Skilled artists have rendered such paintings of the infant Jesus. St. John and the other three evangelists don’t give much room for that, however. Instead their sacred accounts move immediately to the glory of the God-man that his apostles witnessed with their own eyes.

The Son of God remained God. The Son of God became a child.

A wedding took place at Cana, not far from where Jesus was raised (John 2: 1-12). From his lips came a simple directive to the servants: “Fill the jars.” Simple water went in. Exceptional wine came out. This is no ordinary or even extraordinary man. This is the Word made flesh, and his disciples put their faith in him.

A widow trudged to the cemetery, tearfully escorting the lifeless body of her only son (Luke 7:11-17). Jesus’ heart went out to her. “Don’t cry.” With his hand he touched the pallet on which the body lay. “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up. This is no ordinary or even extraordinary man. “God has come to help his people,” they exclaimed, and rightly so.

They brought Jesus a fellow who was deaf and could hardly talk (Mark 7:31-37). He put his fingers into the man’s ears. He spit and touched the man’s tongue. He uttered one word. At once this fellow’s ears were opened, and he began to speak plainly. This is no ordinary or even extraordinary man. This is the merciful Son of God, fully human at the same time.

A LIFE—A GOD—WITH A GRACIOUS PURPOSE

He set his face for Jerusalem. He allowed himself to be betrayed, tried, and convicted. They pierced his hands and feet and hoisted his body up on a cross. He breathed his last and bowed his head in death. This is no ordinary or even extraordinary man. This is the divine Shepherd who willingly lays down his life for his sheep.

On the first day of the week his disciples were gathered behind locked doors. Suddenly, he came and stood among them. He showed them the hands that bore the marks of the nails and the side a soldier had pierced with his spear. “Peace be with you!” This is no ordinary or even extraordinary man. This is the Lord God Almighty, the flesh-and-blood victor over death.

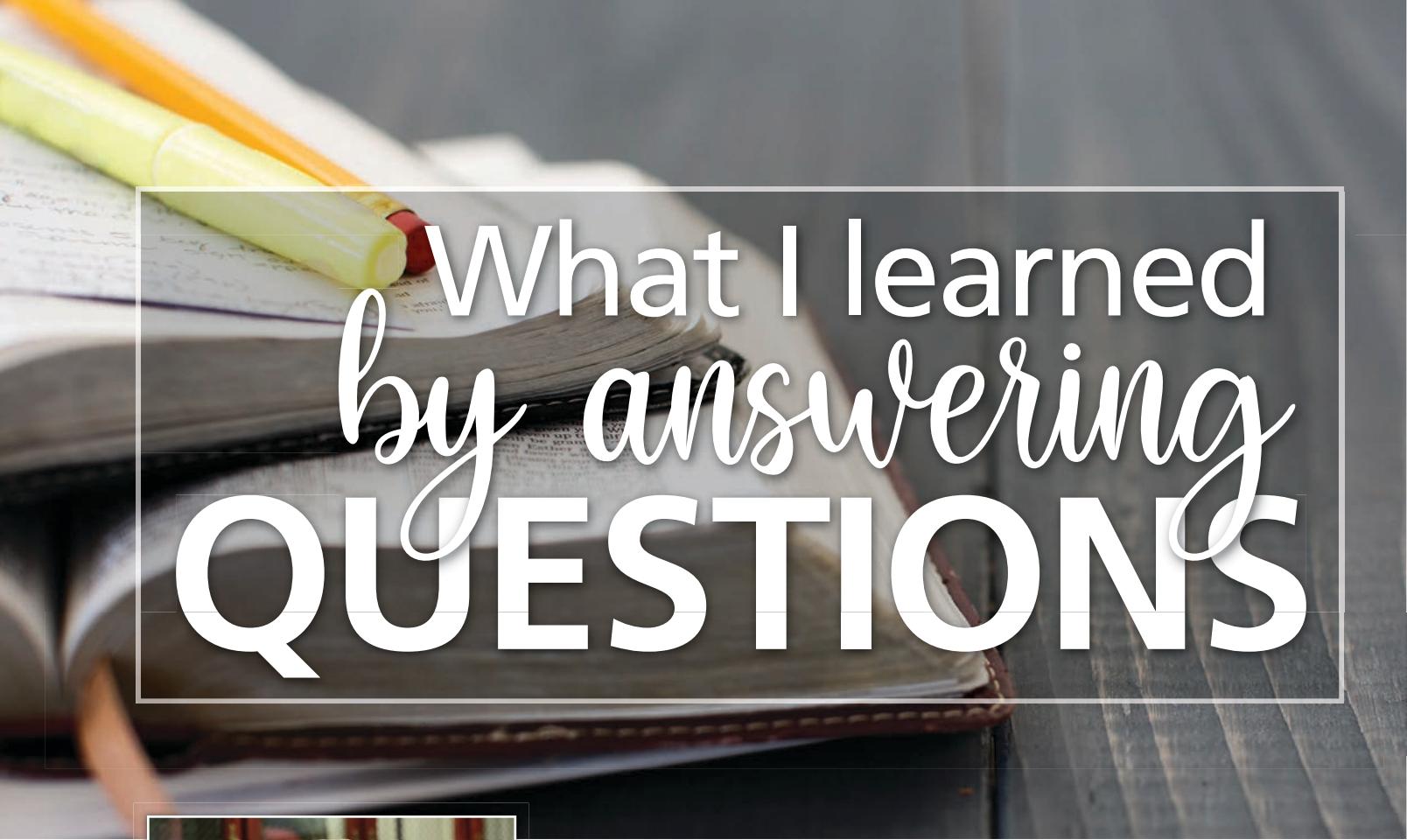
Christmas, then, is so much more than “Happy birthday, Jesus!” It’s what Isaiah prophesied: “To us a child is born, to us a son is given, . . . And he will be called . . . Mighty God” (Isaiah 9:6).

Christmas is so much more than a mother giving birth in lowly circumstances. It’s what Gabriel announced: “The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

Christmas is so much more than cattle, donkey, and sheep admiring a little baby. It’s what the soldier exclaimed when he saw how Jesus died: “Surely this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39). It’s the risen and ascended Lord appearing to the elderly St. John: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:13). It’s the gathered church triumphantly speaking its confession: “For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and became fully human.”

Paul Zell is pastor at Living Savior, Hendersonville and Asheville, North Carolina.

Check out a Bible study on the incarnation of our Lord on p. 33.



What I learned by answering QUESTIONS



After six years, the author of the “Light for our path” column shares his insights.

James F. Pope

Six years ago, I knew my life was going to change. What I could not envision is how much change there would be.

I was asked to be a new contributing editor for *Forward in Christ* (FIC)—the person responsible for answering questions each month. My only concern was, “Where do I get the questions to answer?” That question brought significant change to my life.

BACKSTORY TO LEARNING

In years past, a group of professors and others responded to the questions submitted to the synod’s website. Past FIC contributing editors selected some of those questions and addressed them—as well as those submitted by FIC readers—in print. But I agreed to be the one person to write the monthly column and respond to the questions online.

Realism suggested that I try to fill that position for one year and then have all parties involved assess the situation. As that first year came to an end, I was encouraged to continue the work for five more years. As of this writing in September (for the December issue), I have written 72 columns

for the magazine and responded to more than 2,025 online questioners. By far, most of those individuals asked multiple questions, so the total number of questions asked and answered is easily two to three times that.

Answering those questions was a terrific learning experience for me. The current staff of *Forward in Christ* asked me to share some of the lessons learned.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT THE QUESTIONERS

I learned that WELS members want to be sure of their church’s teachings. “I have a non-WELS Christian friend who spoke to me about Abraham’s bosom as a holding place for the dead before Jesus’ resurrection. What does WELS believe about Abraham’s bosom?” “My wife recently passed away, and she had wanted to be an organ donor when she died. There were a few church members who did not approve of this and would not attend the funeral service. What is the position of WELS on a person being an organ donor upon one’s death?”

I learned that people are interested in witnessing about their faith. “How can

I explain to a nondenominational pastor why WELS baptizes infants?" "Most of my friends are Mormon. Is there a way to share the gospel with them so they stay interested in my faith and remain my friends?"

I learned that people desire to apply the message of the Bible to life's circumstances and challenges. "How do you survive when your 27-year-old son announces he is gay?" "Do we need to give up something for Lent?" "Is there any scriptural basis against cremation?"

I learned that Sunday is a popular day for people to submit questions. "I feel this is a silly question, but today's sermon talked about Jesus being baptized. Why wasn't Jesus baptized as an infant?" "I have a takeaway from Bible study this morning that has left me troubled." "We had the first Bible reading from Acts 1, and in that reading it states . . ." As a former parish pastor, I get it. Parishioners may not have the time or opportunity to speak to their pastor after church or Bible class.

But there's another side to it. "I went to my pastor to ask him something, but he said I should contact you." My role was not to supplant the questioner's pastor. Many of my answers included an encouragement to contact the local pastor. I am convinced that particular message got through. "I know from other posts the answer is most likely going to be to go talk to your pastor and go to counseling, but I'll give it a shot anyway." This questioner was spot on: Talk to your pastor.

I learned that people in other church bodies are also interested in receiving answers to their questions. In fact, 20 percent of the questioners have self-identified as members of non-WELS churches throughout the world or said that they do not have a church home. "I am inquiring into the WELS Lutheran faith. Could you describe what saving faith actually entails?" "I live in the Netherlands and am looking for churches that offer online Bible studies."

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT THE ANSWERER

While fielding questions from anonymous people might seem like impersonal work, it is anything but that. How can emotion and concern be absent when people pour out their hearts to you? "Even though I've attended a WELS church for 44 years, I have no peace that I will be saved." "I am a high school student, and lately I have been

While fielding questions from anonymous people might seem like impersonal work, it is anything but that.

struggling with my faith. I have been questioning my beliefs and whether or not Christianity is the true religion." "I know that Jesus died for my sins, but I'm worried that I don't actually have the Holy Spirit. How do I know?"

Not knowing the questioners does not invalidate the biblical truth: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). I would submit that, because of the anonymity of the questioners and the lack of knowing any outcome of their circumstances, this shared suffering can be greater than that experienced in face-to-face relationships. A fair number of answers included the thought that I would remember the questioner in my prayers. Many responses prompted my prayers. It shouldn't be surprising to learn that even a "digital ministry" can be emotion-filled because it concerns people.

I also learned that many questioners were looking for specific instructions and answers when the real answer was "Christian freedom." "What is the proper way to display flowers during the Lenten season?" "Where in the Bible does it state that we are to celebrate Ash Wednesday, Maundy

Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, and the Lenten season?" "I was wondering what WELS' stance was on donating our earthly body to science."

I learned that I still have a lot to learn. Many a question sent me to my personal library or the Martin Luther College library. "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18) is an instruction applicable to every Christian.

LESSONS LEARNED BY READERS

If the questions mentioned here are of interest to you, you can find the answers online at wels.net/questions, as well as answers to many others.

That is the beauty of the Questions & Answers portion of the synod's website—you can read the questions others have asked. You can learn from their questions and the answers they have received. You can even use these materials for Bible classes, as some churches are doing.

CONTINUING LESSONS LEARNED

Six years ago, my challenging journey began. This month's "Light for our path" column marks the end of my term as a contributing editor for *Forward in Christ*. I will continue answering online questions for another year and a half. David Scharf will begin his term as author for the *Forward in Christ* question-and-answer column. That means that there will be more lessons learned for all involved.

And in case you are wondering, yes, I do have my own questions about the Bible and the Christian life. If we meet someday, perhaps the roles will reverse, and I will ask you one of those questions!

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

Read Pope's final column on p. 9. Find more questions and answers online at wels.net/questions.

A long journey ends with faith in Jesus and a desire to serve him.

Amanda M. Klemp

At age 66, Daryl Fleck is retired and lives in New Ulm, Minnesota. He likes to spend his time volunteering. Now he's getting his feet wet helping with WELS Prison Ministry.

But his journey wasn't exactly down a straight and narrow path.

Fleck grew up in Minnesota, in a poor family with an alcoholic father. Despite his father's alcoholism and his mother's tendency to enable it, he says, "There was love in our family. My dad didn't express his love outwardly so much, but we knew that he loved us. And my mother would always show her love." His father was Catholic, and his mother Lutheran. His mom made sure he and his two younger siblings were baptized, attended church, and were confirmed.

After graduating high school, Fleck worked in construction and eventually met his first wife. They got married and had a son and daughter. Fleck had always considered himself a Christian and would, at least periodically, attend church services. But that was a cause of conflict. He says, "She didn't believe in going to church. She wasn't a Christian woman, which was a big mistake I made. She wouldn't even let me hang

a picture of Jesus on the wall. I tried bringing my kids to church, but because their mother wasn't going, they didn't want to go either." It was a rocky 22-year marriage.

THE SPIRAL DOWNWARD

Fleck eventually left the marriage and moved back to his hometown, where he could be closer to his mom and an old friend. "I had so much guilt and shame for leaving my marriage," he says. "I felt I had let God down and started drinking very heavily."

Then his mother died. "It all happened at the same time. I lost my mother and my wife and family," he says. "Emotionally I was a wreck. I had so much guilt and remorse. I would try to drink my troubles away. Physically and financially, I started going downhill. And spiritually, I gave up on everything. I gave up on God. I was pretty lost."

He started racking up DUIs and stays in the county jail. Each subsequent DUI led to more time in jail. He moved to North Dakota, but the dependence on alcohol moved with him. One morning, Fleck woke up in his car. A neighbor had called the police, and Fleck was charged with another DUI. This time, he went to prison.

A TEMPORARY LULL

During his prison sentence, Fleck pored over Christian materials that

were available to him. He says that after he was released, he felt he was back on his feet and doing well. He remembers feeling like he was getting a fresh start; he even had a good job that he liked. "The biggest mistake I made at this time was saying, 'Okay, God, you can go help someone else now; I don't need you anymore.' I pretty much abandoned [God]," Fleck recalls.

His life soon took a downward turn. A woman he went to high school with got in touch with him. She lived in Massachusetts, and he moved east to marry her. Fleck admits, in hindsight, he probably shouldn't have jumped into that relationship, but he was looking for something he felt was missing after his first marriage ended. After three years in Massachusetts, they moved back to Minnesota, but things weren't going well. After one big fight, Fleck got his last DUI. This time, he spent 5 months in county jail and another 29 months in prison.

THE BEGINNING OF A NEW LIFE

While in prison, one day Fleck felt compelled to pick up and open a Bible. He doesn't recall why he did it, but he remembers exactly to what passage he opened the Bible: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Confessions OF FAITH



LEARN MORE ABOUT PRISON MINISTRY

A major component of WELS Prison Ministry are Bible study booklets with tests that inmates can complete and send back. Volunteers review the tests and send back certificates, a new booklet to complete, and often a note of encouragement.

If you're interested in learning more about sharing God's love and grace to those impacted by incarceration, visit wels.net/pm.

It's a Bible verses he still cherishes every day.

Later he also saw WELS Prison Ministry booklets that were available for inmates.

"They have these little tests at the end of them, so I did the test and mailed it to Prison Ministry. They mailed it back to me and then sent me another book," he says. Fleck ended up completing level 1 and level 2. "I have the certificates hanging on the wall at my apartment," he says. "They mean a lot to me."

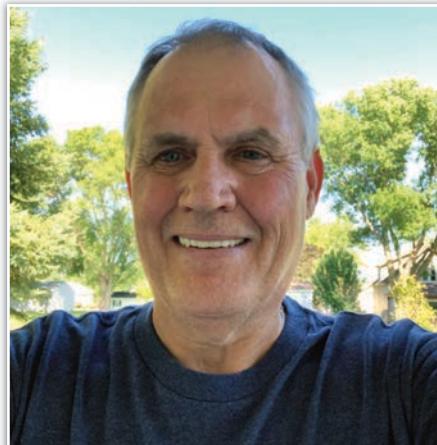
Fleck says he was excited to keep getting the new booklets and tests, because it was nice to get mail in prison. He stresses that the simplicity of the materials is really important, because many people in prison don't have an education. To have something that's simple but still teaches the love of Jesus

is very valuable. He says that the notes from the volunteers and the pictures from school children also really mean a lot to an inmate who doesn't hear much from the outside world. One of the notes he received encouraged him to find a WELS church after his incarceration. He did just that, joining Good Shepherd, Burnsville, Minn., when he was released from prison.

MORE OPPORTUNITIES

While Fleck's time in prison brought him closer to God, there are still family relationships that need to be healed. He says his daughter and brother don't speak to him anymore, and his son, who like his father and grandfather seems addicted to alcohol, isn't interested in a close relationship. Fleck wonders if this is a blessing in disguise. He hasn't had a drink since 2015, and perhaps the distance from his family also keeps him away from alcohol. But he's praying that the relationship with his children will be mended and that they too will come to know their Savior like he does.

Fleck says, "For an inmate, living in the inside like that, it's important to have something to give you hope, something to look forward to when you're released. That's what WELS Prison Ministry gave me. I couldn't wait to get out to find a WELS church. It gives you hope. I'm still hanging on to that hope that I'll reconcile with my family. I believe that's going to happen because WELS



Daryl Fleck

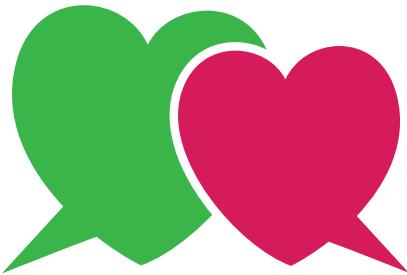
keeps me in a relationship with Christ by attending their church services and Bible studies."

Now a member at St. John, New Ulm, Minn., Fleck hopes to be able to help share God's peace and love with other inmates and with those who are released from prison so that, with God's help, they can fight their addictions and demons, stay out of prison, and stay in the Word. He remembers the Savior's message, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

Amanda Klemp is a member at St. Peter, Savanna, Illinois.



Hear more about WELS Prison Ministry and Daryl Fleck in this month's edition of *WELS Connection*.



heart to heart parent conversations

Every year as Christmas rolls around, I can't help but take stock of all the "stuff" my family has. This year that schedule sped up because we moved right before Thanksgiving. So our fall was spent taking stock of pretty much every item we own. We sold some items and donated many others. It was a great time to discuss how richly we've been blessed and how we can use our blessings to help others, to talk about the role of material possessions in our lives, and to thank God for providing for our physical and spiritual needs.

You don't need to move, though, to have discussions like this with your kids. Read this month's contributions from Linda Buxa and Rob Guenther for ideas on developing a God-pleasing view of "stuff."

Nicole Balza

Join the conversation!

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

HOW CAN WE NURTURE A PROPER VIEW OF "STUFF"?

When it came to teaching our kids about "stuff," we kept it simple. When our children turned 12, they were on their own. (Not really, but it sounds more dramatic that way.)

In reality, that's when our children became responsible for budgeting their own money. Usually when kids get an allowance, they view it as "fun money." We wanted our children to learn that responsible financial stewardship means you give first to God, then put some away for savings, use another portion for responsibilities, and then you can spend on fun stuff.

THE LESSONS

So beginning when our children turned 12, our part of the bargain was that we would pay for food in the house, educational expenses, music lessons, and a few staples like laundry detergent and hand soap. We did the math of how much we spent on clothes, school supplies, haircuts, sports equipment, toiletries, dining out, and entertainment. We added 10 percent to the total so they could give back to God.

Then we increased their allowance to cover those costs. (See . . . we still paid for them, but they were now in charge of allocating their money.) We also

.....

A thirsty pigeon flew over the city looking for something to drink. Finally, he spotted a big bowl of water and went into a dive to get what he needed to quench his thirst. Sadly, the pigeon didn't realize that the bowl of water was only a picture on a billboard. You can guess what happened. The poor pigeon slammed into the billboard, broke his neck, and died. The pigeon was deceived by what looked like it would satisfy. In the end, he was killed by what he thought would give life.

Isn't that the way it works with wealth and material blessings for us? Satan and the world around us promise that if we only had more and better and nicer things, new shiny toys, more games, more fun . . . if only we had these things, then we'd really be living! But what looks like it will satisfy and what promises to give life never really satisfies. It only leads to death in the end.

So how do we find contentment? How do we encourage it in our children? Well, nature abhors a vacuum. We can't just get rid of malcontent, greed, and materialism from our hearts without filling our

kept a running list of money-making endeavors that were above and beyond their normal chores if they wanted to earn more money. This teaches them that if adults want extra cash, they are welcome to get another job to earn it. It's not like they loved doing it, but the kids did look for opportunities to babysit, to work for the neighbors, and to get real jobs with real paychecks when they were old enough.

Each is now thrifty in their own unique ways. One daughter cuts her own hair (and her sister's hair) to save money. My son does not love to spend money on clothes and shoes, so those are on his Christmas list. They pack leftovers for lunch because that's free to them. (Another lesson in "stuff": nothing is free. If it's free to you, someone else paid for it.) They look for clearance items, shop at thrift stores, and reuse school supplies. Still, it's not only about being frugal. They have also learned that some cheap items will break or wear out quickly, so the investment in quality items can be worth the cost.

THE POTENTIAL PITFALLS

In the beginning, they were so worried about running out

hearts with something else. Thankfully, God gives us that something else in his Word: Jesus.

The author to the Hebrews encourages, "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have." But he doesn't stop there. He tells us how we can do this: "Because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5).

So, to save us who crave everything, he gave everything. He humbled himself to be born in a barn, not in a hospital. He lived in a simple house, not one with 800 square feet per person. He didn't have a car, a cell phone, or indoor plumbing. And yet, through it all, he was perfectly content all the time.

And you know why he went through it all: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). By his perfect life of contentment and by his inno-

of money, they never wanted to do anything fun. We had to encourage them that going bowling or to a theme park or eating out are all good things that can be built into a budget.

It is tempting to want to step in when they are about to make what we consider a mistake.

It is tempting to want to step in when they are about to make what we consider a mistake. But we remember that it's better to make money mistakes (or any mistakes, really) when they are young and the consequences are smaller.

Our oldest recently left for college and, during one of her first calls back home, thanked us for raising her to be independent. I didn't need to hear that to believe we did the right thing for our family. But it sure was nice hearing it.

Linda Buxa and her husband, Greg, are raising two daughters and a son in Concord, Wisconsin.



cent death on the cross, we are forgiven. We are right with God! We have heaven as our forever home! We truly are rich!

Maybe this year, instead of buying your children more things to put under the tree, consider buying your children an experience. Take them somewhere fun to celebrate the joy that is ours in Christ. Consider teaching them the joy of giving as they give an old toy to someone less fortunate. Consider teaching them the joy of generosity as you

give them not just presents but money for them to contribute to a WELS ministry of their choice.

Focus on Christ this Christmas. Focus on why he came: to make us truly rich with the riches of heaven! And let Christ drive away our lack of contentment, our greed, and our materialism.

Rob Guenther and his wife, Becky, are raising four boys in New Ulm, Minnesota.





teentalk

Walking on a tightrope

Life's challenges seem difficult, but God is there to help.

Natalie Zirbel

Growing up, I lived on a farm. My siblings and I loved living on the farm, and there were always so many things to do. We were very adventurous, and every day in the summer we would run through the barns and the pens. Nothing scared us. Life was easy, and we had no worries.

One of our favorite things to do in the barns was race up and down the aisle, feeling the breeze rush by us.

It was even more fun when we were given an obstacle to race around. One summer, my dad installed a break in the aisle of the barn that split it in half. This break was about 6 feet deep and 5 feet long. The only way to cross this break was walking across the poles on the top. The poles were about 2 inches thick and 6 inches apart. To the adults and to a 12-year-old like me, this didn't slow us down much, but my younger sister struggled. It was too hard for her to balance and walk across as easily as everyone else did.

I recall running through the barns with my sister one day. As we reached the break, I carefully walked across the pole, pretending it was a tightrope

and acting like I was part of a circus act. As I turned around, I expected her to do the same. Instead, I saw my sister crying at the other side. "I need help! I am going to fall through!" I could see that she was terrified and had no idea what to do.

I pondered how to help her across. I walked halfway down the pole and held out my hand. She didn't trust me though. She was certain she was still going to fall and was convinced there was no way to get across. I asked her to just try it, but she insisted on staying where she was.

We decided to end the fun for that day and went back in the house. My mom asked her why she was crying, and my sister said, sobbing, "I was scared. I couldn't do it. I was going to fall and then I would never get back out and no one could help me!"

I have thought about her fears and those words since. As we grow up, there are so many times we say to ourselves, "I can't do this. There is no way." But God responds, saying, "I can help you do this."

We face so many temptations that are so easy to fall into. It is as easy as missing a step on that tightrope and slipping. Just like that break in the aisle of the barn, some temptations and troubles can seem impossible to get around. Sometimes the only way around it is to walk across it, barely balancing on that pole, not being sure if we can stand firm and stay strong. Thankfully, God holds out his hand to us to keep us standing firm, and he walks us across the scary tightrope of life. Trusting God is the sure way to make it safely across to the other side.

When we are unsure of what to do or how to get ourselves out of a bad situation, we can put our trust in God to lead us to the other side. He is waiting there with loving arms. We just need to trust, and God will handle getting us across the tightrope.

Natalie Zirbel, a 2019 graduate of Manitowoc Lutheran High School, Manitowoc, Wisconsin, is a member at Morrison Zion, Greenleaf, Wisconsin.

CHANGES IN MINISTRY

Pastors

Bader, Paul, to retirement

Bondow, Daniel, to Living Savior, Littleton, Colo.

Faught, Arthur, to St. John (Slades Corners), Burlington, Wis.

Gurgel, Richard, to Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.

Harley, William, to St. John, Maribel, Wis.

Laitinen, Daniel, to Multi-Language Publications

Pilarski, Adam, to St. John, Glencoe, Minn.

Schaefer, William, to retirement

Semrow, Brian, to Beautiful Savior, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Swanson, George, to retirement

VanKampen, Korey, to St. Paul, Tomah, Wis.

Wempner, Timothy, to Good Shepherd's, West Allis, Wis.

Staff ministers

Emde, Kelly, to retirement

Zanto, Eileen, to retirement

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 of the month. An exception is made for December offerings. Gifts received by the bank lockbox up to and including Jan. 8, 2020, will be credited as 2019 CMO, if accompanied by a 2019 coupon. Thank you for your assistance.

ANNIVERSARIES

Appleton, Wis.—Riverview (75). Jan. 5, 2020. Worship, 8 & 10:30 A.M. March 8, 2020. Worship, 8 & 10:30 A.M. June 7, 2020. Worship, 8 & 10 A.M.; dinner, 1 P.M. at Liberty Hall. For dinner reservation, call 920-733-3728. Website, riverviewlutheran.org.

Houghton, Mich.—Lutheran Collegians MTU at Peace Ev. Lutheran Church (50). Feb. 9, 2020. Worship, 10:15 A.M.; meal to follow. RSVP requested by Jan. 26, 2020. 906-482-1602; pastor@peacehoughton.org; lrnitz@mtu.edu. Website, lutherancollegians.org.

COMING EVENTS

Concert—Dec. 1, 2 & 4:30 P.M. The Lutheran Chorale of Milwaukee. Trinity, Waukesha, Wis. Theme, "Prelude to Christmas." Website, lutheranchorale.org.

Live nativity—Dec. 6–7, 6–9 P.M.; Dec. 8, 4–7 P.M. St. Paul's, Howards Grove, Wis. Website, stpaulshowardsgrove.org. 920-565-3780.

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

Live nativity—Dec. 7, 4–7 P.M. Martin Luther, Oshkosh, Wis. Website, martinlutheroshkosh.com.

Christmas concert—Dec. 7 & 8, 3 P.M. Lakeshore Lutheran Chorale. First German, Manitowoc, Wis.

WELS ministerial education school Christmas concerts—

- Dec. 7, 7:30 P.M.; Dec. 8, 4 P.M. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. 507-354-8221.
- Dec. 8, 3 and 7 P.M. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. 262-242-8100.
- Dec. 15, 3 P.M.; Dec. 19, 10 A.M. Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis. 920-261-4352.
- Dec. 20, 7 P.M. Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich. 989-793-1041.

Mid-term graduation—Dec. 19, 10 A.M. Chapel of the Christ, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. 507-354-8221.

WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership—Jan. 21–23, 2020. Sheraton Grand, Chicago, Ill. Website, lutheranleadership.com.

Women's retreat—Feb. 22, 2020. St. Lucas, Kewaskum, Wis. Theme, "New beginnings." Website, stlucaswels.org (under the Bible study section).

Lutheran Recovery Ministries recovery retreat—Feb. 20–23, 2020. Our Lady of Guadalupe Monastery, Phoenix, Ariz. Theme, "Three days of hope." Website, lutheranrecoveryministries.com.

Martin Luther College choir tour—

Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. Website, mlc-wels.edu.

- Feb. 27, 2020, 7 P.M., Rock of Ages, Madison, Tenn.
- Feb. 28, 2020, 7 P.M., Lamb of God, Madison, Ala.
- Feb. 29, 2020, 7 P.M., Faith, Sharpsburg, Ga.
- Mar. 1, 2020, 10:30 A.M., Sola Fide,

Lawrenceville, Ga.; 6:30 P.M., Abiding Peace, Simpsonville, S.C.

- Mar. 2, 2020, 7 P.M., Risen Savior, Pooler, Ga.
- Mar. 3, 2020, 7 P.M., King of Kings, Maitland, Fla.
- Mar. 4, 2020, 7 P.M., Divine Savior, West Palm Beach, Fla.
- Mar. 5, 2020, 10:30 A.M., Divine Savior Academy, Doral, Fla.
- Mar. 6, 2020, 7 P.M., Crown of Life, Ft. Myers, Fla.
- Mar. 7, 2020, 7 P.M., St. Paul, Beverly Hills, Fla.
- Mar. 8, 2020, 9:30 A.M., Open Bible, Oxford, Fla.
- Mar. 22, 2020, 3 P.M., Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.

Pathways to Christ Retreat—Mar. 13–15, 2020. Oshkosh, Wis. Theme, "A friend loves at all times." 920-233-1069. Website, pathwaystochrist.org.

WELS 2020 International Youth Rally—June 23–26, 2020. University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tenn. Theme, "2020 Vision." Website, wels.net/youthrally.

NAMES WANTED

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

Lawton/Fort Sill, Okla.—names and contact information of WELS members and other prospects in this military community interested in joining monthly in-home worship services conducted by Rev. Strackbein, pastor at Holy Cross, Oklahoma City, Okla. Teri Fuentez, barryandteri@earthlink.net.

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. 5 and 19 and Feb. 2 and 16 at St. Jude By the Sea Lutheran Church, 312 E 16 Ave, Gulf Shores. Bible class will follow worship. Evan Dobberfuhl, 715-573-0808; tpcevan@gmail.com.

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.

Question and answer about “Equipping Christian Witnesses”

In celebration of its 25th anniversary in 2020, Martin Luther College (MLC), with the approval of the Conference of Presidents, has begun a two-year capital campaign called “Equipping Christian Witnesses.” The synod is looking to raise \$16 to \$18 million through the campaign. Part of that money will go toward student financial aid. We talked to Michael Otterstatter, vice president of mission advancement at Martin Luther College, to learn more.



DO MOST MLC STUDENTS GRADUATE WITH DEBTS?

Over the past five years, about 75 percent of our graduates have left with an average of \$25,000 in loans.

WHY IS MLC TUITION SO HIGH?

MLC's tuition actually is dramatically lower compared to other similar four-year colleges. However, the net price that students actually pay—which is tuition, room, board, and other expenses minus the average amount of financial aid—is nearly the same. That's because MLC doesn't have the financial resources to offer as much financial aid to our students as other colleges do. MLC started the Congregational Partner Grant Program about four years ago to help meet this need.

HOW WILL MLC USE MY GIFT TO HELP STUDENTS WITH PAYING FOR COLLEGE?

Gifts to the campaign will help fund the Congregational Partner Grant Program matching fund.

In the program, MLC matches dollar for dollar, up to \$1,000, the gift a congregation gathers to apply to the tuition of their student(s) at MLC. This partnership between MLC and sponsoring congregations can provide up to \$10,000 to each student in financial aid support during their years at college. And this is above and beyond all other aid that students might receive!

You can think of this program like two buckets. The first is the bucket of dollars that congregations send in on behalf of their sons and daughters. The other bucket is money that others give to allow MLC to match that gift. Gifts to “Equipping Christian Witnesses” will provide us with the resources to fill the matching bucket for the next five to ten years as we work to make this a regular part of our budget. This also provides a great way for congregations who don't have sons and daughters going to MLC to help future called workers.

WHY IS THIS PILLAR OF THE CAMPAIGN SO IMPORTANT?

All three pillars of the campaign really fit together. Under God's blessing, we're asking for more called workers to meet ministry needs and opportunities that abound all over the world. If we're planning on growth and praying for growth, we have to build for growth. So as we ask you in the first pillar to pray for and recruit more students, we also need to have financial aid ready so these students can afford to attend and don't leave with too much debt. Finally, we need to provide facilities and housing space that will be a home away from home for our students now and in the future.

Learn more about “Equipping Christian Witnesses” at mlc-wels.edu/mlc-campaign.



CALLED WORKER ENCOURAGEMENT

Jeremy Fluegge, a senior at Martin Luther College studying to become a pastor, appreciates the support—both monetarily and spiritually—that he receives from his home congregation, St. Paul, Onalaska, Wis.: “The pastors and members of St. Paul's are genuinely excited for my continued success at MLC,” he says. “It's difficult to put into words what it means that my fellow members of the holy Christian church have my back as I prepare to bring the gospel to all nations.” Money from this campaign will help MLC fund matching grants to the tuition gifts a congregation provides for its student—up to \$1,000 a year.



New site for Lighthouse Youth Center

After every school day, Lighthouse Youth Center provides safe, encouraging, Christ-centered environments to children ages 10 to 18 in Milwaukee. Through its healthy outlets for recreation, consistent support for education, and welcoming opportunities for devotion, Lighthouse has reached thousands of children on Milwaukee's north side, starting at Redemption Lutheran Church in 2006 and expanding to Garden Homes Lutheran Church in 2012.



Lighthouse Youth Center students Curtis and Marquel were baptized at Redemption, Milwaukee, Wis., this year. Eight Lighthouse students were baptized this past year at the two sites.

Now Lighthouse can also reach children on Milwaukee's south side; its third location opens this month.

James Buske, executive director of Lighthouse, says he spent years searching for the right opportunity to add a third campus. "I probably talked to 20 organizations," he says. "I was down on my knee, willing to propose to a couple of them, but it just turned out that it wasn't the right timing."

The right timing came in July 2018 when several area pastors encouraged Buske to contact St. Andrew, Milwaukee. This congregation was considering closing its church and was thinking about donating its building for future mission efforts.

At a congregational meeting at St. Andrew in September 2018, Buske had 15

minutes to explain Lighthouse's mission and its vision for the third location.

Buske says he concluded his message by saying, "This is my promise to you: Lighthouse Youth Center will honor and build off your 123-year legacy of sharing the gospel on this corner. In 12 to 18 months, 30 to 50 neighborhood youth are going to be gathering here. We're not going to be open just one day a week. We're going to be open five days a week. Many of these kids don't even know who Jesus is. So, I want to honor and build off of your legacy."

By early October, St. Andrew decided to donate its building to Lighthouse for the price of one dollar.

St. Andrew conducted its final worship service on Oct. 28, 2018. Lighthouse took possession of the building on Nov. 20, 2018. Now, a year later, Lighthouse is ready to open its doors to a new community of children who need to hear about Jesus.

Although the mission is the same, the ministry at this location will be different. Set in a community that is 70 percent Hispanic, Lighthouse's Polonia campus will be conducting Lighthouse's first bilingual ministry. This is also the first time that Lighthouse has owned its own building; the other locations are connected to congregational sites.

But Lighthouse is ready for the challenges. It has hired a Martin Luther College graduate who has already spent a year teaching in the Dominican Republic to serve as its site director. It also is working with area congregations to provide support and a church home to its students and families.

"We know God to be a God of faithfulness, and we know he's going to be faithful in this process as well," Buske said. "I'm super excited about Lighthouse and the continuation of its mission: to be a beacon for Christ to the youth of the community."

Learn more about Lighthouse Youth Center at lighthouseyouthcenter.com.

WELS news briefs

SPECIAL MINISTRIES

414-256-3241; csm@wels.net

One hundred forty seniors "mined for Jesus" at the annual **Organization of WELS Lutheran Seniors (OWLS) convention** in Galena, Ill., in October. Attendees heard keynote addresses and attended workshops as well as visited local sites. For more than a decade, OWLS has used its offerings to support the WELS European Civilian chaplaincy, which serves military personnel and WELS civilians in Europe. This year, the group presented Military Services with a check for \$50,000 for work in Europe. OWLS also provided scholarships to six Martin Luther College students. The 2020 OWLS convention will be held in New Ulm, Minn., with a special focus on Martin Luther College. Learn more at wels.net/owls.

WELS MISSIONS

414-256-3237;
missionspromotions@wels.net

WELS members involved in Asian ministry across North America gathered at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., in October for the annual **Asian Ministry Conference**. Participants shared encouragement and ministry ideas, brainstormed ways to work together, and participated in Bible studies for continued growth in their faith. Twenty-four pastors, Pastoral Studies Institute students, and others attended, representing Chinese, Hmong, Vietnamese, Korean, and South Asian ministries in North America. Learn more about these ministries at wels.net/missions.



A front-row seat to WELS' Waukesha campus ministry

Please Lord! Just send two or three college students to our gathering tonight.

That was my initial prayer in September 2016 for my first campus ministry event held on the campus of Carroll University in Waukesha, Wis. I had a potential list of college students from the national office of WELS Campus Ministry as I started serving as a volunteer campus ministry pastor. I had contacted every student possible. But the basic question remained: Who would attend?

Turns out, my prayer was small. Suddenly one student walked in and then two more. Before the night was over, six students came for Bible study, tasty snacks, a mixer, and prayer. Little did I know that I was receiving a front-row seat to see how good God is and how he brings his people where and when he wills. I was excited to be able to work with busy college students who need contact with God's Word during a challenging time in their lives. Many of them were living away from the safe protection of parents and fellow Christians for the first time in a brand-new arena where professors and students brazenly question faith, Bible truth, and Christian morality.

God blessed us with steady growth, thanks to the energetic leadership of the students. These students stepped up in

planning and organization and also willingly brought their roommates, boy/girlfriends, and classmates (many of whom aren't even WELS). That first year, six to eight students came regularly; by the second year 8 to 12 were coming to learn more about Christ and his saving love. This October brought the highest student total ever: 29 students. One student reminded the group of the importance of campus ministry: "I didn't even know there were other students here who shared my faith in Jesus, and it's so wonderful to find others to encourage me in my walk of faith."

Not only do these students attend the monthly meetings, but many attend worship and other events at Trinity, Waukesha, my local congregation less than a mile away. This October, 17 college students served the community by sponsoring cars in Trinity's neighborhood Trunk-or-Treat to connect with our neighbors in face-to-face mission work.

These Christian young people are willing to pray for others and for me, especially during my wife's bout with colon cancer. They also share Christ openly on campus. Four students attending our campus ministry joined Trinity this past year. Three of them were confirmed as adults. These new members include Brett, who was brought to our congregation by college friends and wanted to be able to take Holy Communion; Morgan, who remarked how her faith grew through the private Bible information classes at the campus coffee house when she opened up her Bible and experienced the free forgiveness of Jesus for the first time; and Michael, who married one of our first campus ministry students and learned about the truth of Scripture.

At age 52, I consider myself the "world's oldest college student," and this isn't only because I regularly am on campus for our campus ministry get-togethers. I actually recently took Spanish classes at Carroll University, and God opened the door for me to baptize my professor's baby.

What's in store for the future? Only God knows. But together, we'll pray for God's guidance and share his mission to reach out to more students with Christ's love.

As WELS Campus Ministry celebrates its 100th anniversary this upcoming year, consider this: Does your church have a college campus nearby? If it does, talk with the national WELS Campus Ministry leaders on how to get started sharing Christ's love with students. Remember: God does great things through small efforts.

Scott Oelhafen, campus pastor for the Waukesha campus ministry, serves at Trinity, Waukesha, Wisconsin.

Learn more about WELS Campus Ministry at wels.net/campus-ministry. Follow Waukesha's campus ministry at facebook.com/waukeshacampusministry.



Currently, 29 Carroll students attend the campus ministry since its 2016 restart.



Seventeen Carroll University students helped at Trinity's Trunk-or-Treat this October.

Obituaries

Fred A. Bartel, 1927–2019

Fred Bartel was born March 22, 1927, in Milwaukee, Wis. He died July 7, 2019, in Madison, Wis.

He taught at Trinity, Kaukauna, Wis.; Garden Homes, Milwaukee, Wis.; Siloah, Milwaukee, Wis.; and Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.

He is survived by his wife, Grace; one son; three daughters; nine grandchildren; and seven great-grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his first wife, Elaine, and four brothers.

Carolyn J. Wentzel, 1933–2019

Carolyn Wentzel (née Krueger) was born June 25, 1933, in Globe, Ariz. She died July 13, 2019, in Janesville, Wis.

A 1954 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she taught at Emanuel, New London, Wis.; Centennial, Milwaukee, Wis.; St. Matthew, Iron Ridge, Wis.; St. Paul, Fort Atkinson, Wis.; St. Matthew, Janesville, Wis.; and Emanuel, West Saint Paul, Minn.

She is survived by her husband, Arden; 2 sons; 2 daughters; 10 grandchildren; 4 great-grandchildren; and 1 brother. She was preceded in death by two brothers.

John G. Zickuhr, 1943–2019

John Zickuhr was born March 20, 1943, in Watertown, S.D. He died July 17, 2019.

A 1969 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served St. Katherine, Menomonie, Wis.; St. John, Colfax, Wis.; St. Paul, Grant Park, Ill.; Our Redeemer, Grant Park, Ill.; Illinois Lutheran High School, Crete, Ill.; WLCFS—Christian Family Solutions, Germantown, Wis.; and Apostles of Christ, Wauwatosa, Wis.

He is survived by his wife, Karen; 3 daughters; 1 son; 11 grandchildren; and 1 sister.

Jeanette V. Bell, 1937–2019

Jeanette Bell (née Ollmann) was born Nov. 10, 1937, in Maribel, Wis. She died July 21, 2019, in St. Joseph, Mich.

A 1959 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she taught at Zion, Mobridge, S.D.; St. John-St. James, Reedsville, Wis.; Gethsemane, Milwaukee, Wis.; Grace, Eau Claire, Mich.; and Zion, Toledo, Ohio.

She is survived by one son, two daughters, four grandchildren, and one sister. She was preceded in death by her husband, Patrick.

Donovan M. Zastrow, 1973–2019

Donovan Zastrow was born Nov. 21, 1973, in Watertown, Wis. He died July 26, 2019, in Watertown, Wis.

A 1997 graduate of Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., he taught at St. Matthew's, Winona, Minn.; St. Matthew, Appleton, Wis.; St. Paul, Lake Mills, Wis.; and Illinois Lutheran High School, Crete, Ill.

He is survived by his father, stepmother, two brothers, and five sisters. He was preceded in death by his mother.

Geoffrey L. Hoffmann, 1953–2019

Geoffrey Hoffmann was born Aug. 25, 1953, in Pratt, Kan. He died July 28, 2019, in Tomah, Wis.

A 1975 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., he taught at St. Paul, Tomah, Wis.

He is survived by his wife, Susan; one son; one daughter; his parents; and two brothers. He was preceded in death by two children.

John R. Schultz, 1935–2019

John Schultz was born May 20, 1935, in Kenosha, Wis. He died Aug. 20, 2019, in New Ulm, Minn.

A 1957 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., he taught at Immanuel, Medford, Wis.; St. John, Wood Lake, Minn.; St. Paul, Lake

Mills, Wis.; Northland Lutheran High School, Mosinee, Wis.; and Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School, New Ulm, Minn.

He is survived by his wife, Theckla; 2 sons; 4 daughters; 21 grandchildren; 10 great-grandchildren; 1 sister; and 1 brother. He was preceded in death by three children and one brother.

Kent E. Schroeder, 1941–2019

Kent Schroeder was born July 26, 1941, in Baldwin, Wis. He died Aug. 23, 2019, in Oconomowoc, Wis.

A 1967 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served Emmanuel, Stratford, Wis.; St. Peter, Marshfield, Wis.; Faith, Antioch, Ill.; and St. Matthew's, Oconomowoc, Wis.

He is survived by his wife, Lee Ann; three sons; nine grandchildren; four brothers; and two sisters. He was preceded in death by one brother.

Verna M. Witt-Zarling, 1928–2019

Verna Witt-Zarling (née Meyer) was born Sept. 24, 1928, in Neenah, Wis. She died Aug. 28, 2019, in Oshkosh, Wis.

She taught at Grace, Oshkosh, Wis.

She is survived by three sons, four grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. She was preceded in death by her first husband, James; her second husband, Chester; and three brothers.

Richard C. Scherwin, 1945–2019

Richard Scherwin was born March 15, 1945, in Saginaw, Mich. He died Sept. 2, 2019.

A 1978 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served Peace, Echo, Minn.; St. Matthew, Stillwater, Minn.; St. John, Stillwater, Minn.; Salem, Stillwater, Minn.; Trinity, Saint Paul, Minn.; Emanuel, Saint Paul, Minn.; Crown of Life, West Saint Paul, Minn.; and Crown of Life, Eagan, Minn.

District news

MICHIGAN

On Oct. 27, **Risen Savior, Mansfield, Ohio**, a ministry supported by WELS Home Missions, began worship services.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

AZ-CA—On Oct. 26, Redeemer, Tucson, Ariz., celebrated its 75th anniversary.

NW—Riverview, Appleton, Wis.,

celebrated its 75th anniversary on Nov. 3.

St. Peter, Weyauwega, Wis., celebrated its 125th anniversary on Nov. 3.

SA—Peace, Aiken, S.C., launched its church in December 2014 with eight members. On its fifth anniversary, this WELS home mission congregation now has more than 150 members, most of whom were adult confirmands.

SC—Holy Word, Austin, Texas, celebrated its 50th anniversary on Oct. 13. Since the congregation began, it has started seven churches in central Texas.

SEW—Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., celebrated the 40th anniversary in the pastoral ministry of **Paul Wendland** on Sept. 27.

Redeemer, Cedarburg, Wis., celebrated its 50th anniversary on Nov. 17 with a special worship service in its new church sanctuary.

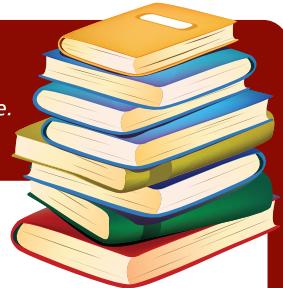
NORTHERN WISCONSIN



The Lutheran Collegians at Michigan Technological University is celebrating 50 years of campus ministry this school year. The group is hosting three special services throughout the year, the first of which was held on Sept. 1. Pictured are current and alumni members of the Lutheran Collegians at Peace, Houghton, Mich.

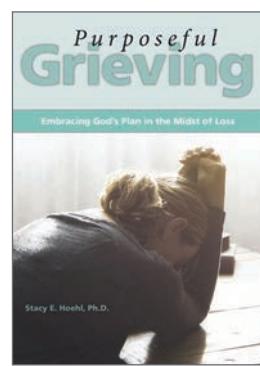
Booknook

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



PURPOSEFUL GRIEVING

One who is grieving is often challenged to find someone who relates to their situation, and Stacey Hoehl is able to offer connection through her writing. In her book *Purposeful Grieving: Embracing God's Plan in the Midst of Loss*, Hoehl admits to tantrums and wrestling with God. This helps the reader understand that these behaviors are



Price: \$12.99

common in a loss. She shares Scripture that gives the grief-stricken heart permission to plead with God and even to ask why. The fact shared that loss will forever change a person's life is valuable along with the warning that the heart of faith is open to the attacks of Satan. The author's wise choice of focusing on Psalm 13 gives her devotions important structure and direction, along with

the encouragement from the psalm that God gives aching hearts words to praise him through their struggles.

More details from the author regarding her own story would enhance the connection with the reader along with the acknowledgment that those we love who die are not always in the Lord, another perspective to some Christians' grieving. The reader should also keep in mind that the seven weeks of devotions are never meant to complete the grieving process, but rather to encourage the reader to see God's hand of purpose to the season of grief, which could, and likely will, extend far beyond the seven weeks.

Most important, without exception, the author points to the cross of Jesus as the only source of comfort. All tasks offered are confirmed as helps in the healing process, not the source of healing. Many Christians will find this book a powerful tool in seeing God's purpose to their grief.

Jane Schlenvogt-Dew, Madison, Wisconsin

On Oct. 27, **Siloah, Milwaukee, Wis.**, celebrated its 125th anniversary.

The district reporters for this month are: AZ-CA—Michael Schroeder; MI—John Eich; MN—James Panning; NW—Dennis Kleist; SA—Newlin Schafer; SC—Andrew Retberg; SEW—Scott Oelhafen.

MINNESOTA



On Oct. 13, NorthCross, Lakeville, Minn., held a grand opening for its new building. Previously known as Bethlehem, the congregation decided to change its name when it relocated to avoid confusion with another local congregation and to reflect its focus on bringing the cross of Christ to people living in the northern part of the United States.

NORTHERN WISCONSIN



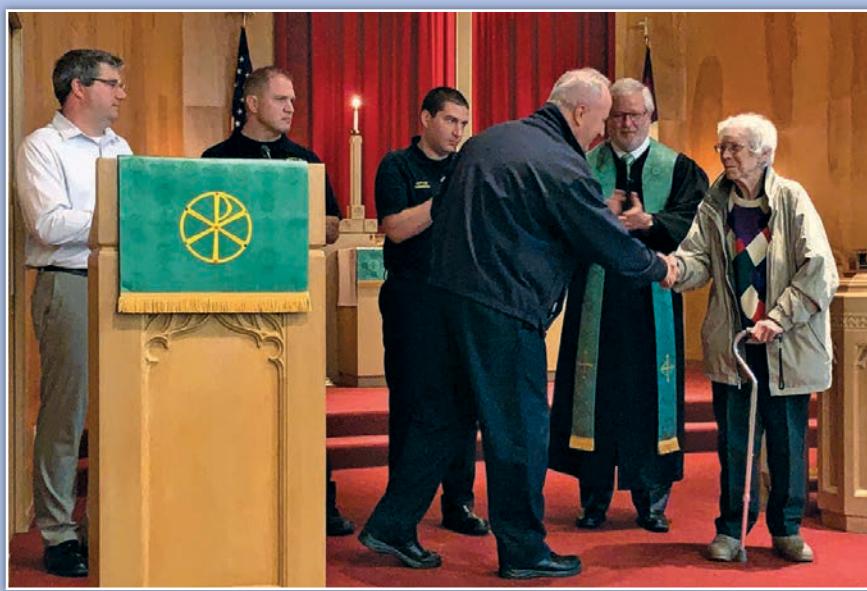
On Sept. 29, Eternal Love, Appleton, Wis., dedicated its new addition that includes expanded space for its preschool, a new chapel and fellowship area, and remodeling throughout its facility. Volunteers from Builders For Christ, a ministry of Kingdom Workers, helped with this addition.

SOUTH ATLANTIC



St John's Lutheran in St. John's, Antigua, ran its annual Health Day in October. One hundred thirty-eight people took advantage of the free health checkups offered by local doctors and medical students on St. John's campus. Members shared spiritual encouragement with the patients from the community, and one patient has started in Bible information class as a result.

SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN



In April, Mardell Williams (pictured, far right), a member of Divinity-Divine Charity, Whitefish Bay, Wis., gave a donation to the North Shore Fire Department for the purchase of the department's first Lucas Device, a life-saving piece of emergency equipment that does chest compressions to the proper depth and at the proper speed. Divinity-Divine Charity then decided to raise funds to help the North Shore Fire Department purchase two more Lucas Devices. On Oct. 20, Divinity-Divine Charity presented a check to Deputy Chief Andrew Harris, and the crew of Engine 84 let members tour one of its fire engines on the church's grounds.



DON'T FORGET Advent

In the midst of Christmas chaos and crowds, Advent points us to what is important.

Stephen M. Luchterhand

The countdown for next Christmas began the day after Christmas last year—364 days until Christmas. (It's 365 days this coming year, thanks to a leap year in 2020.) Of course, Christmas stays under the radar as other holidays, birthdays, and milestones are observed. Yet savvy planners and shoppers deposit money into savings accounts, watch sales, and examine trends with an eye on December and Christmas.

Later in the year the leaves begin to change color in America's northern regions, and the taste of pumpkin invades almost every food and drink concoction imaginable. At that point, retailers quietly begin setting out Christmas trees, ornaments, and decorations. Excitement over Christmas builds slowly, but steadily, until Thanksgiving. Then it's pandemonium.

Christmas trees and decorations go up inside homes and businesses. Lights and displays appear outside homes and businesses. Black Friday unleashes stampedes of shoppers. Cyber Monday extends the chaos online. It's the "all shopping, all the time" race to Christmas: in-store shopping, online shopping, two-day shipping, next day shipping, free shipping. FedEx, UPS, and the USPS are everywhere. Children receive the message, either directly or indirectly, that good behavior will merit more gifts under the Christmas tree.

In the midst of all the distractions and diversions, the season of Advent intervenes.

PROPER PREPARATION

Advent is a Latin word that means "coming" or "arrival." The Christian church year begins with the first Sunday in Advent at the end of November or beginning of December and continues for four Sundays until Christmas. The Advent season quite naturally helps Christians prepare to celebrate Jesus' first coming at Christmas. The four Sundays of Advent offer a powerful spiritual antidote to the commercialism and busyness of our modern Christmas celebrations.

The readings and hymns of Advent help us to prepare for the celebration of our Savior's birth and point us to the Savior's second coming on the Last Day. Visual cues in worship direct attention to the themes and the emphases of the season. Blue (or purple) altar paraments and pastors' stoles symbolize hope. Sanctuary Advent wreaths feature a white Christ candle encircled by four candles highlighting Advent themes. The three blue (or purple) candles symbolize hope, love, and peace. The pink candle symbolizes joy.

In the midst of the hustle and bustle of the season, Advent sharpens our focus.

But nothing prepares the heart for a proper Advent celebration more than the arrival of John the Baptist. While media and culture promote the fun of a "holly, jolly Christmas" and Santas belting out their friendly "ho-ho-hos," along comes John to tell us that we're doing it all wrong.

To the casual observer, John is the Grinch who steals holiday cheer. He's more Scrooge than Santa. He comes across as the wild-eyed, sandwich-board-wearing guy on the street corner. But look past John the Baptist's rough edges, limited wardrobe, and peculiar diet. Listen to his message, even though it isn't very popular, not during this season of "giving" and "sharing" and "harmony." His message, in a word, is "Repent!" (Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-9).

Repent? It's a harsh word for some. Repentance involves more than a mumbled half-hearted apology for sin. It's more than a flippant, "Fine, I'm sorry." True repentance involves turning away from sin, seeking to amend our sinful lives, and renewing our efforts to follow God's will.

The Christian is properly prepared to celebrate Christ's first coming and to look forward to his second coming when the heart is prepared through repentance. As we look forward to Christmas and to the Lord's return, we repent and wait.

LEARNING TO WAIT

No one likes to wait. Whether age 2 or 92, people prefer speed and convenience. "Instant" may not be fast enough for people with high tech and broadband speed. For the driver in a hurry, waiting for a stoplight to turn green again can seem like the longest 45 seconds of one's life. For children eager to open Christmas presents, the wait seems never ending.

God's Old Testament people learned to wait. From Adam to Abraham to Moses to David to Isaiah, God's people waited hundreds, even thousands, of years for the Lord to keep his promise to send a Savior. They heard the promises, and many responded with prayer and praise while they waited. But waiting was hard to do. Time and again, faithful prophets like Habakkuk (1:2) and Isaiah (6:11) and leaders like David (Psalm 13:1) cried out, "How long, Lord?" David expresses the faith of every believer on either side of Christ's first coming: "I wait for the LORD. My soul waits, and in his word I have put my hope" (Psalm 130:5 Evangelical Heritage Version [EHV]).

God's promises of a Savior finally found fulfillment in the Christ Child at Christmas. The wait was over.

Believers today live in the "in-between time" between the first and second Advent of our Savior. We must wait for the fulfillment of God's promises of the second coming of our Lord and King.

CHRIST'S THIRD COMING

How shall God's people wait? It is not easy, but it is essential to wait patiently and faithfully by giving our attention to God's Word.

One early Sunday morning during the days of President Franklin Roosevelt's time in office, the phone rang in the

office of the church that the president often attended. The minister answered and heard a voice on the line inquire, "Tell me, sir, do you expect the president to be in church today?" "That I cannot promise," said the minister, "but we do expect God to be there, and that should be reasonably good reason for attending."

Wherever and whenever God's Word and sacraments are in use, God is there as he promises. Christians typically speak of the two comings of Christ: his first coming as the babe of Bethlehem and his second coming on judgment day as the returning King of kings and Lord of lords. To keep us properly prepared and faithfully waiting, we can speak of a third coming of Christ: his continual regular coming to us in Word and sacrament.

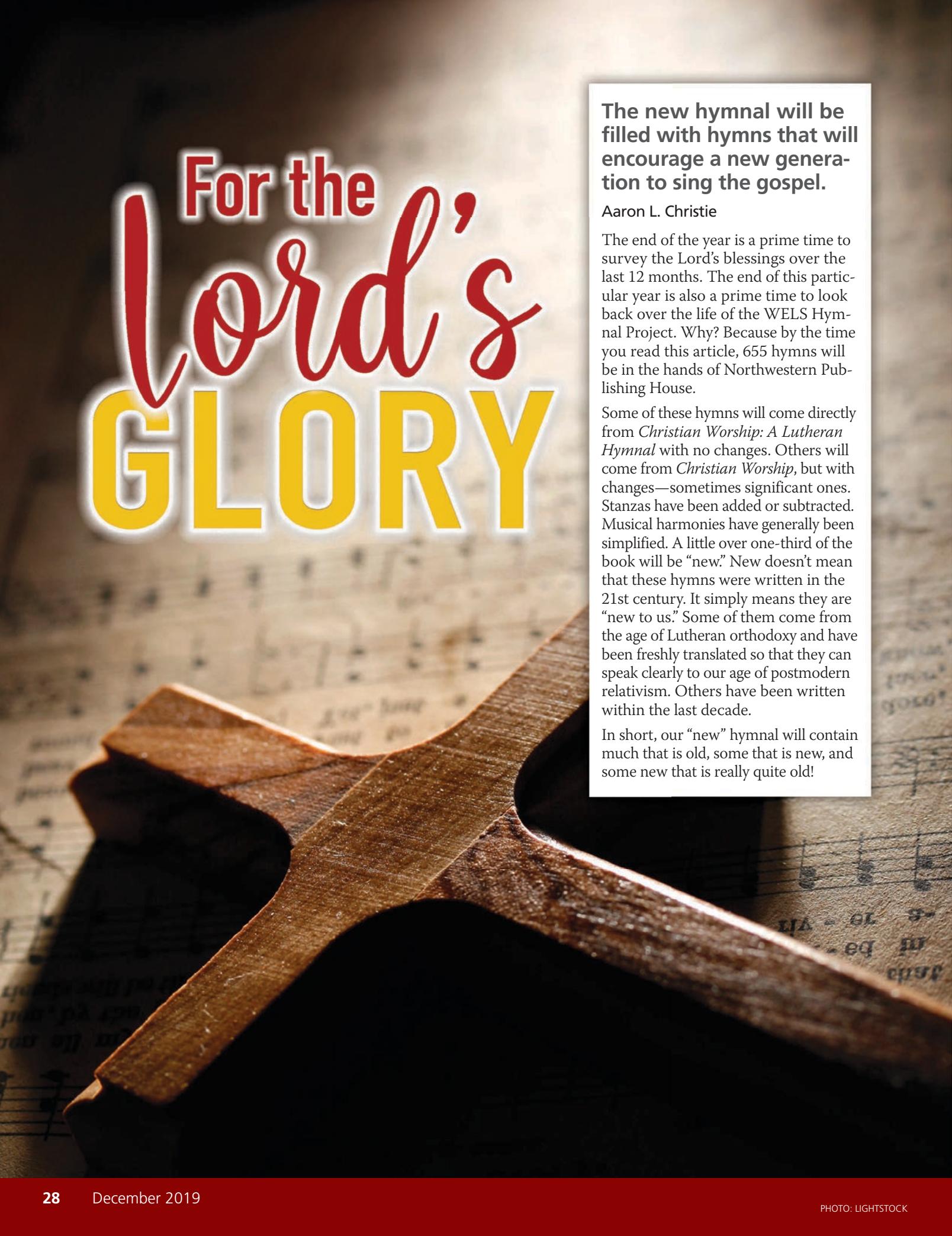
In the midst of the hustle and bustle of the season, Advent sharpens our focus. We keep busy with sending cards and gifts, shopping, wrapping, decorating, baking, cleaning, working, parenting, planning, traveling, and the countless other tasks that make for exceptionally full calendars this time of year. But don't forget the season of Advent. The season intervenes and directs us to what is so essential for our Christian lives—Jesus and his Word.

Now more than ever with all the distractions, we need the reminders of Advent to set our hearts on things above, to fix our eyes on Jesus, and to lift up our heads in anticipation. The message of Advent is clear and powerful: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. The kingdom of heaven is here. Your King has come. He will come again. Listen to his Word. Receive his sacrament. And wait . . . faithfully and patiently."

"The one who testifies about these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20 EHV).

Stephen Luchterhand is pastor at Trinity, Minocqua, Wisconsin.

For the Lord's GLORY



The new hymnal will be filled with hymns that will encourage a new generation to sing the gospel.

Aaron L. Christie

The end of the year is a prime time to survey the Lord's blessings over the last 12 months. The end of this particular year is also a prime time to look back over the life of the WELS Hymnal Project. Why? Because by the time you read this article, 655 hymns will be in the hands of Northwestern Publishing House.

Some of these hymns will come directly from *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* with no changes. Others will come from *Christian Worship*, but with changes—sometimes significant ones. Stanzas have been added or subtracted. Musical harmonies have generally been simplified. A little over one-third of the book will be “new.” New doesn’t mean that these hymns were written in the 21st century. It simply means they are “new to us.” Some of them come from the age of Lutheran orthodoxy and have been freshly translated so that they can speak clearly to our age of postmodern relativism. Others have been written within the last decade.

In short, our “new” hymnal will contain much that is old, some that is new, and some new that is really quite old!

LOOKING BACK AT THE WORK

Looking back on the work of the Hymnody Committee, one is filled with thanks to the Lord for the blessings he has poured on our small synod. The committee is filled with men and women who not only appreciate the poet's art but are dedicated to the catechism's content. They are at home with the music of Bach yet eager to expose our synod to the best our modern age can muster. All the members of the Hymnody Committee have "both feet in the parish." This is by design. In a very real way, the new hymnal was developed in the pulpits, classrooms, balconies, practice rooms, and pews across our synod. Thousands of hours of preparation and months of meetings all total up to years of labor invested in a new hymnal for the next generation.

Looking back, WELS members should know that decisions were not made lightly. When we work with hymns, we are working with precious objects from the church's history. Even more, we are working with the priceless truths of the gospel. The Hymnody Committee searched through dozens of hymnals, books of religious poetry, and websites. Over the last six years, their eyes have viewed literally tens of thousands of hymns. Of those, more than four thousand were voted upon at the subcommittee, Hymnody Committee, or Executive Committee level. Roughly 1,900 hymns received more thorough review. Of those, 900 received full text and musical treatment. Of those 900, the best 655 were awarded a place in the new hymnal. These 655 hymns were chosen with the knowledge that for every hymn that was voted "in," another dearly loved hymn was now "out." The Hymnody Committee tried its best to be stewards of the church's treasures and the gospel's truth. The gospel is precious. God's people are precious. God's people need and God's people deserve hymns that put the gospel in their mouths, ring the gospel in their ears, and sing the gospel into their souls. That's the goal of Lutheran church music. The results of our work we commend to the Lord and his church.

Looking back means viewing years of hard work, thousands of decisions, plenty of professional disagreement, and ongoing evangelical encouragement.

LOOKING FORWARD TO THE HYMNAL'S RELEASE

Looking forward, what can you expect when you crack open the new hymnal for the first time?

You will immediately notice that many of the musical harmonies are simpler than those in *Christian Worship*. This means that many of the hymns have been set to enable singing in harmony. But you will also note that more than 70 hymns will be printed with melody only—no parts at all. Why? Some of the hymns are intended by their composers to be melody only. Other hymns can save precious pages by placing the melody in the hymnal and the accompaniment in the accompaniment edition. As you delve deeper into the book, you will notice that fewer hymns have two different melodies. Basses and altos will gladly discover that some keys have been lowered to a more "comfortable" singing level.

Musicians will be pleased to hear that the hymnal has been designed to be the singers' book. The accompaniment edition has been designed to be the keyboardists' book—packed with alternate harmonizations and festival settings. The *Musicians' Resource*, an electronic-only product, will provide instrumental parts for all the hymns in the hymnal.

The point? The new hymnal stands at the top of a pyramid of musical resources that will support the singing of God's people on several different levels.

DREAMING FORWARD

This leads us to dreaming forward:

Imagine a book that sings of Christ crucified and raised to life again, a book that helps Lutherans teach Christ to the next generation, that enables them to proclaim the gospel in their worship and inspires them to confess Christ to a dying world.

Imagine a book that contains the

treasures of the church's past with the riches of the church's present.

Imagine a book that takes our Lutheran heritage seriously and considers our place in modern society thoughtfully.

Imagine a hymnal that encourages people to sing, keyboardists to play, and musicians to make music in God's lovely dwelling place.

Imagine a generation of children that puts down their phones—just for a few minutes!—and opens up a hymnal to listen, to learn, and to sing, as they prepare to pass on the faith to their own children.

Imagine a church that goes against the grain of American consumerism. A church that understands that music is not something simply to be purchased and consumed, but that it is God's gift, something that we make together as members of one family of believers.

Imagine gospel-rich hymns strengthening the church's unity.

It has been said, "Preach the gospel. Use words if necessary." This saying fundamentally confuses law and gospel. It divorces the gospel from the message of the gospel and places a Christian's deeds ahead of Christ's saving deeds. Instead, I hope that the new hymnal will encourage a new generation to "Sing the gospel. Use notes if necessary." As we do this, we are doing precisely what the Spirit commanded the Colossians to do: "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts" (Colossians 3:16).

What will be in the new book? No, even better: *Who* will be in the new book? Jesus will be. And that makes me dream sweet dreams for the church's future!

Aaron Christie, Hymnody Committee chairman of the WELS Hymnal Project, is pastor at Trinity, Waukesha, Wisconsin.

This is the second article in a three-part series on the new hymnal being released in Advent of 2021. Look for the next article in February 2020. Learn more about the WELS Hymnal Project at welshymnal.com.



RECOVERED *in Christ*

A former addict finds peace and healing in the promises of God's Word.

Rachel M. Hartman

After drinking with friends on the weekends in high school, Mark Keller* watched alcohol slowly take over his existence. "At one point, it became all that I did," he says. Now, years later and alcohol-free, he credits his life's turnaround to Christ. "The passages in the Bible have explained [things to] me and comforted me. There is someone who can save me, and he made me a new person."

SINKING DOWN

Keller grew up in a Christian setting and went to church on Sundays. He

went through catechism classes and was confirmed as a teenager. Despite the religious background, issues related to addiction were prevalent at home. "There were some things going on in the family that were not healthy," Keller says.

In high school, Keller struggled with anxiety and depression. He discovered that alcohol helped temporarily relieve the lows he was feeling. "I found an extra boost out of it," he says. "I was operating at an intense level and struggling with social situations. When I got drunk, I think I got a bigger bang for my buck."

Keller drank with friends during the next years. "Our weekends were focused around who could buy alcohol," he says. "We weren't that connected

to school and sports." The pastime soon became a vicious cycle. Alcohol helped ease Keller's anxiety for a time, but when the effect wore off, his body wanted to return to the previous state. The stress caused panic attacks and an urge to drink more.

"What really started to catapult everything was that transition out of high school and into adult life," Keller says. "Drinking became everything I wanted." He tried taking college classes and working, but he sometimes showed up inebriated. "I wasn't sticking to college or holding a job, and I felt miserable about it. The solution was drinking, and then the next day you feel miserable and you're not moving forward with your life."

It seemed there was no way out. "Alco-

hol was preventing me from having a functioning life," he says. "I turned to alcohol to deal with the shame and embarrassment about it."

A MOUNTAIN OF SHAME

With his life so far from where he wanted it, Keller found it hard to interact with others, especially those who weren't heavy drinkers and the members at church. "You could feel that people could see that you were not okay, that you were dirty," he says. When asked basic questions about school and jobs, Keller had no answer. "It isolates you from people who are healthy and doing well. It marginalizes you so much."

Keller tried consoling himself by rationalizing he was involved in the music scene. He liked to visit bars featuring up-and-coming bands. Often, though, he was so drunk that the next day he couldn't remember who played.

After about ten years, Keller felt like he had hit an all-time low. "I was blacking out many nights, if not every night," he says. Friends, counselors, church members, and recovery group leaders tried to help, but the efforts didn't stick.

FINDING STABILITY

To get his life in order, Keller decided to get away from his surroundings and move across the country. He used the change in scenery as a restart button. He drank less and finished college, found a job, and got married. "Drinking wasn't a huge issue at that point," he says. "Every time I drank, I got drunk, but it wasn't interfering with my life."

From the outside, it seemed like Keller was on the right track. But while he didn't struggle as much with alcohol, he found his anxiety surfacing in new ways. "I had huge fits of rage," he says. "I would try to push things back to the way I wanted them." His rage usually didn't show itself while he was at work, but rather manifested itself when he was by himself or at home.

In his new location, Keller attended a WELS church regularly and was struck

with the power of the gospel. "God's Word is true and alive and active," he says. It helped him gain perspective on the different aspects of his life. "I realized how much of my struggle with drinking had stemmed from wanting to always be comfortable and always have things go my way and not to have

"When we trust in [God] and his promises, it's transformative for our lives."

to tolerate frustration." The sermon messages struck him in a new way. "I was glad the lights were low because I cried through sermons—sometimes from guilt and shame and other times over the beauty of what Christ has done."

Keller also learned that the congregation offered a weekly recovery meeting. At the time, he felt like his struggles with alcohol were under control. He also thought his anger was manageable. "There was such a disconnect between my professional life and home life that I didn't admit to myself that I had a problem with anger and was harming my marriage and kids," he says. Still, he decided to attend the meetings, thinking he might gain general tips about healthy living.

He soon realized where he could make improvements. "It was through the process of this group that I got clarity with what was happening and how I was trying to control it," he says. The people in the group listened and of-

fered their support. "I had people I could call or text and talk me through an anger situation."

Through working with this group at church, Keller experienced positive changes in his life. "Eventually those fits of rage disappeared," he says. "I also realized that, given my makeup, I couldn't have highs and lows. Even though I was drinking less I needed to quit completely."

PEACE THROUGH CHRIST

Now, six years later, Keller doesn't touch alcohol and can't remember his last fit of rage. He continues to meet regularly with his group at church and attends an annual addiction retreat. Through these connections, he also mentors others on their journey toward recovery.

Keller is quick to explain to them that change stems from Christ's work and his promises. "I found everything else is just superficial and doesn't get to the core of it," he says. "It doesn't speak to the tremendous need we have."

Keller also points out to others that God's message is for all people. "The Bible's definition of sin describes us as being sick and having a disease, of being in bondage. That's true for the alcoholic and drug addict in a public way."

Yet Christ's death and resurrection are for everyone too. "When you call on God's promises and you're forgiven, the passages of the Bible take on a new reality," he says.

Keller notes verses in Romans chapter 7 that continue to impact him. "Paul says, 'What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!'

It is this guidance that can lead the way through recovery. Says Keller, "When we trust in him and his promises, it's transformative for our lives."

Rachel Hartman is a member at Divine Savior, Doral, Florida.

* Name has been changed.

NEED HELP?

Lutheran Recovery Ministries offers Resilient Recovery groups and an annual retreat to help WELS members and others who are in recovery, have a loved one in recovery, or struggle with any habitual sin. Its next retreat will be offered Feb. 20-23, 2020. Learn more at lutheranrecoveryministries.com.

“All I want for Christmas . . .”

Glenn L. Schwanke

[Our heavenly Father's] Spirit wrapped the perfect Christmas gift in flesh in the womb of Mary.

Age 7: “All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth, my two front teeth, see my two front teeth.”

Age 9: “I want an official Red Ryder, carbine action, two-hundred shot range model air rifle!”

Age 16: “I want a 1968 Ford Mustang 428 Cobra Jet with the 335 hp V8 engine.”

Age 30: “I hope my husband goes to Jared and gets me a pair of earrings with the 18k yellow gold bead, topped by a pavé diamond dangle.”

Age 50: “Hon, let’s buy the Sun Tracker Party Barge 22 DLX, with the 60 ELPT FourStroke Command Thrust motor. It will be great fun for the grandkids next summer at the lake. Come on, hon, it’s only \$23,995 at the no-hassle price!”

Age 64: “All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth . . . and six more incisors, four canines, eight premolars, and eight molars. Let’s skip the wisdom teeth this time around.”

Is there anything on that list you want for Christmas, or is your wish list different? Don’t worry. Retailers will do their best to have the perfect gift for you this Christmas! Amazon and Amazon Marketplace alone carry more than 353 million products, including 64,274,875 for the home and kitchen. Their selection is so huge that some have called it “the endless shelf.”

But maybe this Christmas you realize you need something you can’t buy off of any endless shelf or find in a dentist’s chair. Maybe there’s a hole in your heart that nothing fills. An ache deep down that never goes away.

Maybe that’s because your life is broken . . . by addiction—and a new toaster oven can’t fix that. By a failed marriage or a child who won’t talk to you anymore—and a driveway full of big toys or a weekend shopping spree can’t make it better.

The truth is, all of us are broken in one way or another—by sin. But sin’s consequences go much further than a deep-down ache, a guilty conscience, and sleepless nights. Sin’s consequences are eternal. Death. Hell. Can you even begin to imagine heartache that will never go away because you are forever separated from the only one who is goodness, righteousness, mercy, and love?

But our heavenly Father doesn’t want that for any of us! That’s why his Spirit wrapped the perfect Christmas gift in flesh in the womb of Mary. And nine months later, Mary “gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger” (Luke 2:7). That same Christmas night, an angel shattered the quiet outside of Bethlehem when he announced to lowly shepherds, “Today in the town of David, a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

By inspiration, the apostle Paul glimpsed into the manger and saw what the little baby in swaddling clothes means for us all: “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy” (Titus 3:4,5).

There’s nothing wrong with wanting a Red Ryder BB gun or some new teeth for Christmas, as long as you’re not greedy or selfish about it. And as long as you never forget the one Christmas gift all of us really need.

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

The Scripture references used in this article are from the Evangelical Heritage Version.

THE INCARNATION OF OUR Lord

Paul E. Zell

For many congregations, the Gospel of the Day is the keynote for each worship service. The Gospel for Christmas Day is John 1:1-4. Based on that reading, the heading for the service might be “The Incarnation of our Lord” as the evangelist declares that God’s one and only Son, the eternal Word, became flesh. (The word *incarnation* draws from the Latin for “the act of being made flesh.”)

The identity of Jesus Christ is of critical importance to all who call on his name. It comes as no surprise, then, when the devil prompts false teachers to attack it. Believers must be prepared to proclaim the truth and defend it.

ONLY SEEMED TO BE A MAN?

For instance, some have taught that Jesus Christ only *seemed* to be a man. They will say that his body was that of a phantom, that his suffering was more theater than reality.

Read Hebrews 2:14-18.

- Which phrases indicate that God’s Son truly and fully became a human being?
- Christian doctrine is always practical. The writer mentions at least four practical outcomes of the Son of God’s incarnation. Underline them in your Bible.
- Recall at least three instances in the ministry of Jesus that give evidence to his being fully God.
- Recall at least three instances in the ministry of Jesus that give evidence to his being fully human.

A SYMBOLIC TESTIMONY?

Some scholars have asserted that a virgin birth is biologically impossible. It would not pass the test of scientific inquiry, and it must be regarded as a “symbolic” testimony to the Christian message.

Read both Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-38.

- Which verses proclaim the virgin birth of Jesus as real fact?
- What Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled by this event?
- How do Joseph’s and Mary’s reactions

to the angel’s words set the tone for the way God’s people today will respond to the doctrine of the virgin birth?

- What announcements elsewhere in Scripture refute the allegation that certain statements in the Bible are impossible because they do not adhere to the laws of nature?

ONLY GOD?

The church at Colosse came under attack from false teachers who felt that all matter is evil. Since the Son of God is good, they said, he could not have become an actual flesh-and-blood human being.

Read Colossians 1:15-20 and 2:9-12.

- The fact that Jesus is fully God could not be more obvious. Where, however, does the apostle also point to his human nature?
- What is one of the practical outcomes of this God-man’s work?
- Colossians 2:9 is a brief and bold statement of the two natures of Christ. Glance through what follows. By what means have you been joined to him and his bodily resurrection from the dead?

As true man, Jesus lived under the demands of God’s law without sinning. As true man, he shed his blood and died, redeeming sinners from death and hell. As true God, his obedience to God’s law and his substitutionary death count for all human beings. It’s no wonder that angels mark the incarnation of the Son of God with reverent and joyful worship. As do we. “Glory to God in the highest!”

Paul Zell is pastor at Living Savior, Hendersonville and Asheville, North Carolina.



Read answers online after Dec. 5 at wels.net/forwardinchrist. Read more about the Word made flesh on p. 10.

FOR FURTHER READING

The Athanasian Creed (pp. 132,133 in *Christian Worship*)

The People’s Bible: John by Gary Baumler. See especially pp. 6-22. Available from Northwestern Publishing House, nph.net.



A handwritten signature of John O'Bryan in black ink.

Only by God's
grace through the
One born in the
city of David are
we heirs of heaven.

Heirs of heaven

What does God see and know about us humans? We often think that he has forgotten us, but God sees all that we have done, all that every human has done. Yes, all of it. God says, "Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?" (Jeremiah 23:24 Evangelical Heritage Version [EHV]). So what has God seen of us humans? Murder? He saw when Cain splashed his brother Abel's blood on the ground. He has seen every murder since, not just the ones that make headlines in our news. He also sees the secret violence of bloodshed hidden in so many unsolved cases. Add in the casualties of war over the centuries. That's a total we cannot comprehend, but he knows each of the dead and their stories.

The picture grows darker and more perverted, if that's possible, when we think of all the other evils that have been and continue to be committed on our planet. It makes my head spin to think of all God has seen and still sees.

At one point, God told us what he saw: "How great the wickedness of the human race had become" (Genesis 6:5). In the verse after his observation, we read, "The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth." That's a powerful indictment! Tragically, our world today is no better.

What is surprising is how patient and long-suffering God is with human evil. At one point, he did destroy the world along with all its evil and washed it clean. But since then humanity has forged a path back to the dark and evil past.

Will this ever change? Isaiah pictures God looking for someone on earth to bring about justice, truth, honesty, and righteousness. God "[sees] that there [is] no one" (Isaiah 59:16). God, of course, had a plan. He has always

had a plan: "His own arm achieved salvation for him." That's why he did not sweep away Noah and his family with all the others. The great deliverer whom God promised to send had not yet come.

Then in God's good time, "when the set time had fully come," he did the unthinkable: "God sent his Son to be born of a woman . . . to redeem those under the law, so that we would be adopted" (Galatians 4:4 EHV). The deliverer—the Christ, or Messiah—is the Lord himself as the angels proclaimed. A babe in Bethlehem came to endure the punishment for the sins of all humanity. It had to be so. No one among the sons and daughters of this world could have righted the wrongs of so many evil deeds. God did the unthinkable: He wiped away all the sins of humanity with the blood of his one and only Son. What a gracious, undeserved solution.

We may still wonder from time to time why God doesn't simply remove disease, death, and evil—especially when these things enter our lives. But Christmas reminds us that Jesus came to make us heirs of heaven. As heirs, we wait for that new heaven and new earth. God will deliver on his promise, but in his good time, not ours. Peter reminded his readers—including us—"The Lord is not slow to do what he promised. . . . Instead, he is patient for your sakes, not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9 EHV).

Only by God's grace through the One born in the city of David are we heirs of heaven. As heirs, we are aliens and strangers here because we are washed clean by the water of our baptisms. We wait for our inheritance and invite others to share it.



CHRISTMAS really happened

The gospels tell the truth of a birth that really matters.

Jeffrey L. Samelson

"Hey, Sally, you know this stuff. We got a kids' Christmas book donated—all about baby Jesus and the manger. Should I put that with the fiction or nonfiction?"

Sally stopped what she was doing and gave her coworker Joe a puzzled look. "Huh? Nonfiction, of course!"

"But aren't fairy tales fiction?" Joe asked. Sally collected herself before answering. "Yes, but the Christmas story isn't a fairy tale."

Joe smiled condescendingly. "Okay, sorry, but c'mon. It's got stars, angels, cute animals, and strange men bowing to a baby. What else should I call it?"

"No, you don't understand. It's true," Sally said. "It really happened—and it really matters."

If you've been a Christian a long time, chances are you haven't thought much about whether the Christmas story is true or not. But you likely have people in your life, or whom you will encounter, who don't see it the same way. They see it as just a fairy tale. Those are the very same people who most need to know

the truth of it, because it's all about Jesus, the One they need to know to be saved.

So it's important to be ready to tell the real story of Christmas so that the gospel is heard. You should expect skepticism. To be fair, if you didn't already believe it, you would find a lot of the events in and around Nazareth and Bethlehem rather fantastic and hard to accept. This makes it doubly important that when we tell the story, we separate truth from tradition.

Matthew and Luke tell us what really happened, and their gospels have been shown by objective standards of inquiry to be reliable historical documents. In spite of all the questions about their gospels, no skeptic has ever disproved anything in them. We learn from them about the miraculous conception of Jesus, about Joseph and Mary and their trip to Bethlehem, about the virgin birth, and about the appearance of the angels to the shepherds. Most of all, we learn who that child in a manger really was and why he came.

No matter how closely you read the gospels, you will not find a mention of a hard-hearted innkeeper, talking animals, a little drummer boy, or three kings crowding into a stable with the exhausted mother of a newborn. No candy canes or decorated trees, no

lords-a-leaping or maids-a-milking, and certainly no Santa Claus. Not even a clear indication that Dec. 25 is the actual birthday of Jesus.

But we don't need any of those things.

Christmas represents the end of God's promising to save us and the evidence of his doing it. The birth of Jesus is tangible, historical proof that God loved the world—so much that he was willing to give it his only Son. Despite us being rebels and sinners, God's undeserved love led the Son to leave his home in heaven and to humble himself to be born of a woman, with one great purpose: To rescue us all from hell and to open heaven for forgiven sinners.

Christmas has no need for things like magic or the unnatural praise of adoring animals. What needs to be believed is wonderful enough without the embellishments and extras that can end up obscuring what's important.

So we want to separate the fiction from the facts and tell everyone, all around, the true story of Christmas. We want the uninformed, unbelieving, and skeptics to understand that it all happened.

Myths don't matter, but Christmas does. Really.

Jeffrey Samelson is pastor at Christ, Clarksville, Maryland.

Just a little peek!

JANUARY 2020

FORWARD IN CH

A LUTHERAN VOICE

Forward in Christ is relaunching
the magazine in January.

Changes include . . .

Redesigned cover and interior pages

Expanded *Confessions of faith*

This is WELS—photos from our readers

Q&A column with accompanying Bible study

A new website and weekly e-newsletter

nph.net/forwardinchrist or call 800-662-6093

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

We've kept the best of *Forward in Christ* and focused on bringing you even more features that will help you on your walk of faith. Look for the January issue in your mailbox or at your congregation the week after Christmas.