

DECEMBER 2020

forwardinchrist.net

FORWARD IN CHRIST

A LUTHERAN VOICE



**WAITING
FOR JESUS**

**FOLLOWING
GOD'S VOICE**

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TRADITIONS**

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LAST DAYS**

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POSTMASTER

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. Send address changes to *Forward in Christ*, c/o Northwestern Publishing House at that address.

ON AUDIO OR IN LARGE-PRINT

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

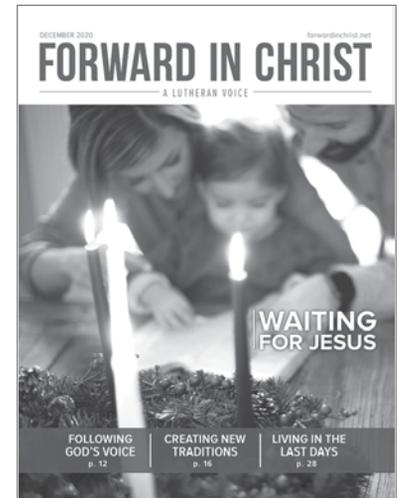
WHAT'S INSIDE

December can be a time of waiting . . . for Christmas Eve candlelight services, for family celebrations, or even for a difficult year to finally be over.

While you wait, ponder these thoughts from our authors this month:

- What the angels meant when they declared, “Peace on earth,” the night of your Savior’s birth (p. 6).
- How waiting is still the heart of Advent faith (p. 10).
- The importance of following God’s voice through the chaos, even if the world disagrees (p. 12).
- Ways to plan new holiday traditions at a time when your usual celebrations may be in jeopardy (p. 16).
- The word *unprecedented* and how it fits into your Christmas reflections (p. 20).
- The comforting message that Jesus is coming soon to take you to be with him in heaven (p. 28).
- God’s glory at the manger and beyond and how it is your light to shine in the world’s darkness (back page).

Merry Christmas as you wait for Jesus!



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Julie Wietzke

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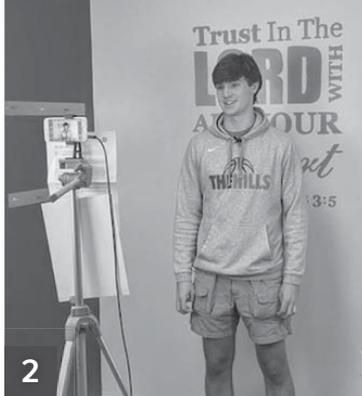
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FEATURED ONLINE Did you know that you can share online encouragement, thoughts, and responses about FIC articles? Make sure you’re signed into Facebook and comment at the end of each article at forwardinchrist.net.



THIS IS WELS

Take a journey around WELS through these photos from our churches and schools.

1 | Christ Alone, Keller, Texas 2 | Micah, host of Our Savior's Kids, a weekly program presented by Our Savior, Birmingham, Ala. 3 | Saviour of the Nations, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada 4 | Michigan Lutheran High School, St. Joseph, Mich. 5 | Divine Savior—Sienna, Missouri City, Texas 6 | Teachers from St. John's, Dakota, Minn., show off the glasses they received as part of the Minnesota District Virtual Teachers' Conference 7 | Great Plains Lutheran High School, Watertown, S.D.

SEE MORE AT forwardinchrist.net. Have a photo to share? Send it to ficsubmissions@wels.net or upload it at forwardinchrist.net/submit.



Like Joseph

“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife” (Matthew 1:24).

Daniel J. Habben

JOSEPH HAS BECOME one of my favorite real-life characters from the first Christmas.

READY TO SERVE

Joseph is not flashy like the wise men. He’s not outwardly fervent like the shepherds. What stands out about Joseph is his humble faithfulness. Like an offensive lineman just doing his job to protect the quarterback, Joseph faithfully did the work God gave him: He protected and provided for Mary and her baby.

Like Joseph, your station in life may not be very glamorous. Perhaps you’re wading through school obligations. Maybe you’ve set aside a career to look after your family. Maybe you clock in at a windowless 9 to 5 job. You might be tempted to think, *Is this all there is to life?*

If Joseph ever felt that way, we don’t know about it. What we do know is that he was a faithful husband to Mary and a faithful stepfather to God’s Son, Jesus.

Our children, our coworkers, and our classmates are God’s sons and daughters. By serving them, we serve our Savior. Awaking to that truth every morning gives a joyful sense of purpose to even the most routine day.

READY TO CHANGE COURSE

Of course, Joseph’s faithful role almost ended before it began. He assumed, like anyone would, that Mary had been unfaithful. He was preparing a discreet divorce, but then an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream to tell him that all was not as it seemed. Mary’s pregnancy wasn’t a result of her sin. She was pregnant because of God’s grace. The child was the fulfillment of a 700-year-old prophecy that the virgin would be with child and give birth to a son. And this was no ordinary child. He was Immanuel—a small Hebrew word for a towering truth: God with us.

This heavenly intervention changed everything. Mary would not be a disgraced single mother, but a cherished wife. The child would not be branded as illegitimate but would be raised in the care of a loving stepfather. And just in case these human parents would ever forget the child’s origins, the angel told Joseph to name the child Jesus, or “Savior.” It wasn’t just a name, but a mission. This child would save his earthly parents and all people from their sins.

Now here’s something else I love about Joseph: He changed course based on God’s word and promises.



PHOTO | Lightstock

Like Joseph, we can humbly admit when we’re wrong and then change our intended course to match God’s will.

Imagine him waking up in a cold sweat when he realized that what had seemed so right—divorcing Mary—was in fact so wrong. God wants us, like Joseph, to wake up to this truth: Just because we’ve thought about something for a long time and it feels like the right thing to do, it may not be. God wants us to lay our plans before him in prayer, but he also wants us to match those plans with his will as revealed in his Word. Like Joseph, we can humbly admit when we’re wrong and then change our intended course to match God’s will.

But what about those shameful times when we’ve gone our way rather than God’s way? Here is our assurance: Just as a powerful Shop-Vac inhales clods of dried mud from under the seats of a car, so also has Jesus absorbed every one of our sins when he died on the cross. That doesn’t just leave us clean; it leaves us ready, like Joseph, to serve.



Contributing editor Daniel Habben is pastor at Mt. Calvary, Flagstaff, Arizona.

Peace on earth—but what kind?

The year was 1914. World War I had thrown the continent of Europe into a conflict that would last for four years and kill or wound more than 25 million people. After a rapid German push into France, the advance stalled, and the armies of Germany and Great Britain dug in facing each other. From their cold and muddy trenches on either side of the line, soldiers on both sides could hear their enemies talking. They could see the smoke of the campfires and smell each other's cooking.

Then, in the middle of the horror of a bloody war, something very unusual happened. It was Christmas Eve. The guns and artillery on both sides had fallen strangely quiet. At 8:30 P.M., from the other side of the no man's land separating the two armies, the British soldiers heard something. It was singing. German soldiers were singing "Stille Nacht." The British soldiers responded by singing "The First Noel." Then, cautiously, a British private climbed out of his trench and crawled through the barbed wire. He was met by a German scout who offered him whiskey and cigars. Before long, soldiers along the entire front were mingling with their enemies, singing Christmas carols together, sharing gifts of chocolate and tea, and even participating in a pick-up game of soccer. (The Germans won the game by a score of 3-2; English soldiers claim that an English chaplain serving as the referee missed a foul that would have taken the winning goal away.)

It was a poignant moment in history—a moment of peace and friendship in a time of war between enemies. But the peace enjoyed that evening would not last. As dusk arrived on Christmas Day, one German soldier said to his new English friend, "Today we have peace. Tomorrow, you fight for your country and I fight for mine." There would be no further moments of peace until the end of the war in 1918.

We long for peace—especially in a year like 2020. We pray for peace in our cities. We hope for peace in our polarized political arena. We desire peace between racial and ethnic groups. We yearn for peace between nations. It's not surprising that so many long for peace during the Christmas season. "Peace on earth!" is printed on Christmas cards, featured in songs, and spoken in Christmas greetings.

But when the angels proclaimed that the newborn Savior would bring peace on earth, they were not talking about the end of war, calm in the streets, or civility in politics. All those kinds of peace are certainly desirable and are blessings when they happen, but that peace is fragile and uncertain, sure to be fleeting and temporary.

The peace proclaimed by the angels outside of Bethlehem is completely different.

They announced a peace between God and his rebellious people that cures troubled consciences and removes guilt. They spoke of a peace that was not temporary but a spiritual peace that would last for all eternity. They spoke of a peace that was not the result of skillful negotiations or careful compromise but was rather accomplished when, 33 years later, the baby born in Bethlehem would say from the cross with the voice of total victory, "It is finished."

So, sing with the angels this Christmas. Praise God for giving us the kind of peace that the Christ Child brought to you and all people.



Mark G. Schroeder | WELS President



PHOTO | MelAnne Designs

CONFESSIONS *of faith*

Lives battling anger and addiction are met by God's grace.

Jasper B. Sellnow

PHOTO | Lightstock

"SHE'S ALWAYS taking on another project," Jim says with a smile.

Brandee and Jim Cranfield had spent the morning moving items into the newly completed church building for St. Paul, Adams-Friendship, Wis. Now they were loading up bookshelves to take home and paint so that they looked nice in the new church.

Brandee and Jim have lots of projects keeping them busy these days. They are remodeling their home, working on fixing a vehicle for a friend—in addition to vehicles of their own—and chasing after kids and grandkids who need a little help or encouragement. "All my projects are ten-year projects at this point in my life," says Jim. "They'll get done when they get done."

The look in Brandee's eyes tells you that she'll see them get done sooner than ten years. "We love doing stuff together," Brandee says. "It's one of the reasons I married him."

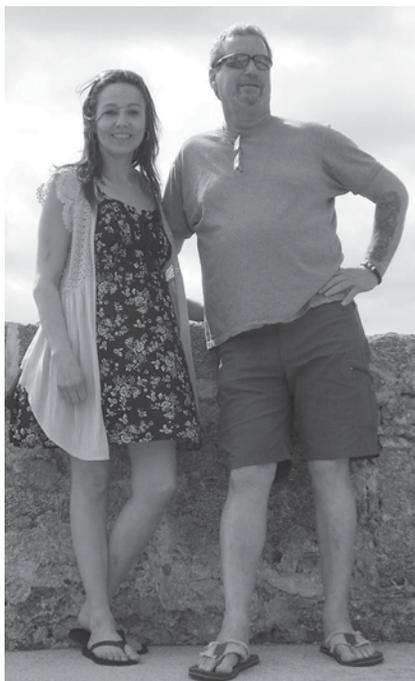
Three years earlier, marriage was not something either Jim or Brandee were even remotely thinking

about. They had both taken a long and winding road to find each other, but God had plans for their journey that neither of them expected.

SURVIVING DIFFICULT CHILDHOODS

Growing up in Des Plaines, Ill., Brandee had a loving but also challenging relationship with her parents. Alcohol and abuse were common companions at home. When Brandee was 9 years old, her mom passed away from breast cancer. "Thirty years ago, treatment was new, and funds were low . . . we were poor," Brandee remarks. At the age of 10 she was behind the wheel trying to drive her father home when he was drunk. "I grew up way too fast too soon," Brandee reflects. "My mom took me to Catholic church where I was baptized and later confirmed, but after she died, I got mad at God. And I stayed mad for about 20 years."

For a long time Brandee would go to sleep crying and wake up crying. Anger, pain, and meanness were how she describes her coping mechanisms. But despite the rocky start to her life, she found her





Brandee and Jim Cranfield with Jim's relatives (left) and on their wedding day (center).

tumultuous relationship with her father was still a close one, and one that would improve when he quit drinking later in life. And so, when her dad passed away, it was different than it had been when her mother died. The anger and pain were not the same. Yet her relationship with God was not a whole lot better.

Brandee got married at 18, but the marriage was over in three years. She said she'd never marry again but found herself married once more. This time her husband left after nine months—and he took their kids. Brandee started drinking. “It only took one, and one is never enough,” Brandee remembers. Her battles with alcohol led to her spending a total of about two years in jail.

Meanwhile, Jim grew up in Louisiana before his family eventually made their way to Wisconsin. He remembers his mom sending him on the bus to a Baptist Sunday school while she tended to the bars she ran. Jim recalls, “My folks would go to church once in a while, but basically I think they sent us to Sunday school so they could get five kids out of the house for a bit.”

That loose connection to a church would end, however, when they moved to Wisconsin. It wouldn't really start up again for almost 40 years. “I believed in God. I guess I always figured if I died, I was going to heaven. I figured I was all good,” Jim says. “Now after studying the Bible, I'm more aware of where I was really going back then and aware of what God really says in his Word about my relationship with him.”

Jim spent much of his life working as a diesel mechanic, truck driver, cook, and bartender. He got married and

had children, but the marriage didn't last. “I've personally come a long way,” Jim says, “but I won't get into all the details.” A life lived around the bar scene led to a long relationship with alcohol and short relationships with people. “As I've come to know God's Word, I've come to realize how bad I was to people in my life,” Jim reflects. “These days, I've found myself more and more thanking God for the people and things in my life.”

MAKING NEEDED CONNECTIONS

When Brandee and Jim met three years ago, they were both self-admitted “bad drunks.” She was visiting a bar he worked at and, at first, they didn't like each other at all. But they began seeing each other even though they were both dating other people as well. Eventually Brandee asked Jim if he wanted to stop seeing other people and go exclusively with her. He wasn't sure how serious she was. Then she asked him to go to church with her and work with her to quit drinking. “Oh, she is serious!” Jim remembers thinking. “And then I started taking it seriously too.”

Brandee had made connections with church even after her painful childhood. She'd found a church that offered a Mothers of Preschoolers group as well as a Celebrate Recovery program for addicts. But it was while spending time in the Adams County jail that Brandee made connections with St. Paul. This local WELS church offered Bible studies led by lay men and women twice a month. “I really enjoyed my time in jail getting to know the ladies, Joanne, Becky, and April, who'd visit and share God's Word,” Brandee

says. Brian Schmidt, St. Paul's pastor in Adams at the time, also met with Brandee in jail and went through Bible classes with her.

After finishing her time in jail, Brandee continued taking additional Bible information classes. God kept working on her heart through his Word. Eventually she brought Jim with her, and God got to work on him too. Just like Jim and Brandee, the Lord doesn't mind taking on a number of projects all at once.

GROWING IN FAITH

Thinking back over their lives—especially the past three years—Jim and Brandee marvel at God's plans for them. "God puts you in places at certain times to meet certain people for certain reasons," they agree.

When Brandee asked Jim to come with her to church and then Bible study, things began to change for both of them. Neither of them wanted to waste time. "That's where God's helped a lot," they concur. This past summer they got married in an outdoor worship service that allowed friends and family to hear God's Word and see them make their promises to each other.

How amazing it is to remember that no one is so lost and confused that God cannot find them and bring clarity to their lives.

For many St. Paul members, this was a special day, one for which to be thankful. Jim and Brandee are thankful too. "I don't think you'd have thought you were getting married at 58," remarks Brandee to Jim. "I never thought I was getting married again!" says Jim, laughing. "Me either!" Brandee says. The Lord had other plans. His work on them individually brought them together in marriage.

God's work on them isn't over. Much like Jim's "ten-year projects," God continues to work patiently and consistently on the hearts of his people. Jim and Brandee have quit drinking and now find themselves working on new things in their walk of faith. Jim spends every morning and evening in Bible study, reading from an app on his phone. They still come to Bible information class even through they've been through it before. Brandee is eager to help those in the community who are walking where she has walked. Brandee comments, "If it wasn't for God making me better and helping me with people in my life, I don't know where I'd be. Right now, it seems like everything is going forward, going up."

The gospel BRINGS FREEDOM BEHIND BARS

St. Paul in Adams-Friendship began as a small mission of St. Paul in Mauston, which sought to reach a county that was nearly 80 percent unchurched and did not have a single WELS church.

As the mission grew, new members began joining the church, including Sam and Christa Wollin. Sam was the county sheriff at the time and helped St. Paul start a Bible class at the county jail in town. St. Paul's volunteers from both Mauston and Adams led the Bible studies. Institutional Ministries, a WELS-affiliated ministry, provided materials as well as helped with monthly training for the leaders.

Brandee is a wonderful example of how offering Bible classes and resources to local jails can extend the reach of the gospel in our communities. Many of the men and women in county jails will find themselves back in those communities in a matter of months. Having the support of a local WELS church can be a huge blessing.

about Institutional Ministries at im.life.

Jim and Brandee are great reminders of God's grace and patience. The Lord has shown them both what true forgiveness and peace are in Jesus Christ. They are discovering new ways to serve the Lord in their home, church, and community. They are continuing to grow as God works on their hearts with his Word to convict and comfort them with law and gospel. How amazing it is to remember that no one is so lost and confused that God cannot find them and bring clarity to their lives.



Jasper Sellnow is pastor at St. Paul's mission congregation in Adams-Friendship, Wisconsin.



ADVENT MEANS

waiting

When will he ever come? God's people wait for Jesus.

Kurt P. Ebert

Wait. It may just be the biggest little word in the Bible describing real faith.

A farmer must wait for the rains and the following crops, says James (5:7). Servants wait for their master to return (Luke 12:36), and bridesmaids wait for the groom (Matthew 25:5), says Jesus. We wait in hope for the Lord, says David (Psalm 130:5). Saints in heaven are instructed to wait just a little while longer until the judgment (Revelation 6:11).

"Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently," wrote St. Paul (Romans 8:24,25). But how patient are we really? It depends how much we trust the One who makes the promise to be fulfilled.

THEY WAITED FOR A BABY

Elizabeth knew a bit about waiting. She was married to Zechariah and was no longer expecting to have a

child. Scripture says, "They were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive" (Luke 1:7).

Only a woman can really understand the agony behind these words. Can you imagine Elizabeth, the young bride, excitedly looking forward to her first pregnancy? It's all she ever dreamed of, being a wife and mother, the happy manager of her family. Imagine her friends and family, as weeks pass into months, giving her that knowing look and asking, "Anything yet?" She shakes her head shyly, with a bit of concern weighing on her heart. Zechariah is busy with his work, and, if he is bothered by her childlessness, he doesn't let on. The months become years, and she pleads to God, "Have mercy on me, Lord, and grant me a child!"

After a time, her prayers for a child become less fervent, less frequent. The dreaded word *barren* is whispered behind her, the word she herself has whispered within.

Slowly the truth sinks in that she will be one of those women who simply will not be able to conceive. She will be that aunt who always will look on at the happy families of her sisters and brothers, smiling with con-

gratulations outside but inside feeling cheated of her great dream.

Now she is far beyond the age of childbearing. She's become more comfortable with her station in life; she has accepted childlessness as God's will for her. Her friends are no longer talking about their children so much. Her life is wrapped up with serving her husband in his priestly duties and honoring the God who called him to serve.

And then . . .

Something strange happened at the temple when Zechariah was serving as presiding priest. It took him an achingly long time to come out and bless the people after prayers. And when he did, he couldn't say a word. He was struck dumb.

Waiting is still the heart of Advent faith.

Elizabeth asked, "What happened?" But he could not answer. Then on a piece of writing paper she asked again. Out came the scrawled, silent story of the heavenly angel who visited him in the temple and promised, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord" (Luke 1:13-15). And the reason Zechariah couldn't speak? He couldn't believe the angel's words. Speechlessness was God's powerful sign to the old man that he was telling the truth about this coming child.

Elizabeth sits down, struck speechless herself. "Me? Now, at this time of life? And what about this child that is to come from my body—the herald of the Messiah, a delight to many? And Zechariah—how long have you been praying for a child? Can this be true?"

It was. Shortly thereafter, her aging body sprang to life and she was found to be with child. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people" (Luke 1:25).

In her sixth month, Mary of Nazareth came to visit and stayed with Elizabeth until the birth of the baby. "When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy" (Luke 1:57,58). His name was John.

THEY WAITED FOR JESUS

Waiting patiently is the heart of the Advent message first spoken in Eden: "I will put enmity between you

[Satan] and the woman [Eve], . . . he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). The snake-crusher would come and restore all things!

Maybe Eve thought the Lord would fulfill his promise already in her first child, Cain. She would be disappointed and called to a lifetime of waiting, then dying, without seeing the fulfillment.

Many dozens of generations would pass, and the children of Israel would learn to pray fervently, "I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the LORD more than watchmen wait for the morning" (Psalm 130:5,6).

When the dawn of salvation finally broke in the birth of Jesus, true Israel rejoiced. They were like Anna who saw Jesus presented at the temple. We're told that "she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38).

WE WAIT FOR JESUS

Are you waiting too? Certainly not in the same way Elizabeth was, or Mary, or Anna. Our practice of counting down until Christmas can't compare with the way God's people were asked to wait for the arrival of God's own Son from heaven. We live in the era of fulfillment, "the last days," as the prophets spoke of them. We look back at those who have witnessed God's salvation. "He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God," we often sing with gusto on Christmas morning in the words of Psalm 98:3.

Even so, yes, we wait. Waiting is still the heart of Advent faith. We wait for Jesus to fulfill his promise, "I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3). We wait for him to put all his enemies—sin, death, hell, Satan, and all who serve them—under his feet. We wait for him to finally rid our existence of sin, pain, sickness, disappointment, and death. We wait to see the new heaven and the new earth. We wait for the day when every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every mouth will declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Sometimes it seems so distant, so impossible. But it will come.

Maybe Elizabeth's wait will help us not give up during ours.



Kurt Ebert is pastor at Christ Alone, Thiensville, Wisconsin.



FOLLOW ME

PHOTO | Lightstock

Following God's voice is better than following all the voices of the world.

Rebecca Schermerhorn

Whom are you following?

Fifteen years ago, the answer to this question would be drastically different than what it is now. Today, "following" others and "having your own following" are commonplace among users of Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. And who you follow can tell a lot about your personality and interests. Your targeted ads can be so spot on that you feel like they are reading your thoughts at times. Being an influencer is an actual job that can pay for bills and even give you celebrity status with the right following.

More recently, social media has become your voice, showing what you stand for and support. I have read

some influencers get torn apart, make apologies, and even change their businesses all based on what their followers want them to believe and favor. I've also seen them get shamed for not openly supporting all the current agendas that the world declares should be followed.

I wonder what it would be like if Noah, Ruth, and Paul were on social media.

@NOAHARKBUILDER

What would people think of @noaharkbuilder when he warned them of the coming flood? Do you think the comments on his ark progress pictures were responses like, "Way to go!" and "You're so talented!"? I doubt it! Perhaps something more like, "Hey, stupid, why build a boat so far away from water?" I am sure there was a lot of unfollowing happening and people declaring, "What a joke! God judging

us? Not going to happen," or "How dare you judge me for what I believe! Who are you to say that God is going to destroy me!"

Yet despite what other people thought, God was pleased with Noah. He remained with Noah among the chaos. When the ark was finished, God closed the door to the ark. He stayed with Noah during the year-long float. Then he made his covenant with Noah under a rainbow (Genesis 6:1-9:17).

"By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith" (Hebrews 11:7).

@RUTHGATHERSSHEAVES

How about @ruthgatherssheaves? Ruth was widowed and left Moab

with her also-widowed mother-in-law, Naomi. Times were tough, and she and Naomi had no means to provide for their very basic needs. Yet Ruth decided to remain with her mother-in-law when it would have been much easier to go back to her homeland, her previous gods, and an easier life. She chose to follow the way of the true God and stay with Naomi to help care for her.

Her following was sure to encourage her in the opposite direction. "Now is the time for some me time, Ruth. Take time for yourself. This isn't the time to be worrying and caring for others." "Get serious, Ruth. Get married again. There are plenty of good men here."

But Ruth did not return. She told Naomi, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried" (Ruth 1:16,17).

@SAULNOWPAUL

What about @saulnowpaul? His following was sure to be in an uproar as he took a full 180-degree turn from persecuting the Christians to becoming persecuted himself. Some might have posted negative comments: "He was stoned and left for dead. That's where he should have stayed," or "He ruined our businesses in Ephesus with all his attacks on our goddess Diana."

Paul remained a follower of Jesus. "Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10).

@CHRISTIANSTODAY

It seems as if it is getting more and

more difficult to say and do the right things. Sometimes we have to take a step back and remember what we truly do believe because of so much that is on social media, on the news, and in the world around us. We can get tricked into believing something is good and right, when in fact the world just wants us to follow another way.

THE STILL SMALL *voice* OF HIS WORD

Nathan Nass, pastor at St. Paul, Green Bay, Wis., shares more thoughts on the best voice to follow.

The loudest voices often aren't the best voices to follow. Have you learned that lesson in life? Although people who shout stand out, their shouts are often foolish. How many times have you been deceived or misled or tempted by the loudest voice in the crowd or the group? The Bible gives this advice, "The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools" (Ecclesiastes 9:17).

That's so true, isn't it? Especially because the voice of God often isn't the loudest voice in the room. Instead, God speaks to you through the still, small voice of his Word. There God promises life and peace in Jesus. There God comforts you with his presence and purpose in your life. In that Word, God shows you the path through this world into heaven.

If you're listening to the loudest voices around you, you'll miss the peace and joy God wants to share with you. Pay attention to his voice.

But this isn't new. Jesus himself warned the disciples of this before he sent them out to proclaim the news about him: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witness to them and to the Gentiles. . . . You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:16-18,22).

There are countless other examples in the Bible of people believing and doing the right thing when it was difficult and uncomfortable or even nearly impossible: Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, Job, Mary and Joseph, John, and the disciples, to name a few. Through these examples, we can find encouragement to continue our walk with Christ when it's not what the world would do and when the world posts negative and cruel responses to our faith. When we face persecution for what we believe, we can find comfort in the stories of the Bible and learn from our forefathers' experiences.

@THEREALCHRISTJESUS

Jesus invites us, "Come, follow me" (Matthew 4:19). We can do so with confidence! "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).



Rebecca Schermerhorn is a member at Grace, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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Q & A WITH DAVID SCHARF

I have a friend who is caught in a sin. I care about her, so I try to talk to her about it, but she just says, “The Bible says not to judge!” Am I being judgmental by trying to point out her sin?

WHERE “DON’T JUDGE” COMES FROM

Our world promotes the idea of tolerance. In fact, it seems the only sin is to say that someone else is wrong. The policy of tolerance promotes the unbiblical philosophy that truth is determined by each individual person, not by the moral absolutes of God.

Sadly, when people say, “The Bible says not to judge,” they usually desire the freedom to do what they want without you or their conscience getting in the way. This is dangerous thinking because unrepentant sin separates a person from God (Isaiah 59:2).

WHAT JESUS MEANS BY “DON’T JUDGE”

But does your friend have a point? Doesn’t Jesus say, “Don’t judge”?

Actually, yes. However, it is important to know what point Jesus is making. The section most often referenced about making judgments is Matthew 7:1-5:

“Do not judge,” or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

When we pay close attention to Jesus’ words, we realize that he is not condemning all judging. Jesus is condemning hypocritical judging

because that will never win anyone over. The drunk man at the bar is not in the best position to tell the person on the barstool next to him, “You know, you really shouldn’t drink so much.” That would be hypocritical.

Jesus says to remove the plank out of your own eye. Then you are in a position to judge in the sense of pointing out someone’s sin because you are concerned for that person’s soul.

KEEP YOUR GOAL IN MIND

There is a difference between being judgmental in a pharisaical, harsh, or arrogant way and making a judgment about someone’s behavior to help that person. God wants us to speak the truth, but to do so in love (Ephesians 4:15).

Keeping your goal in mind for your friend is the key when you do need to point out her sin. Make sure to do it with humility because we are all sinners. Make sure to do it in a way that lets her know you care for her. Make sure you show her what your goal is: forgiveness.

Jesus says, “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over” (Matthew 18:15). Your goal is to win your friend over so she can find forgiveness at the cross of Jesus. Love her enough to say something, and pray that she would do the same for you. Tell her that you hope she does!

Martin Luther said, “Christianity is just one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread.” Lovingly show your friend Jesus, the Bread of Life!

ASK A QUESTION AT forwardinchrist.net/submit.

Judge for yourself

David G. Scharf

JUDGE SEEMS TO be a dirty word in our culture. However, the word *judge* simply means to “form an opinion or conclusion about” something. The Bible says, “Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). God desires us to be mature in our faith. One of the ways we do that is by speaking the truth in love to one another. This involves making judgements.

MAKING JUDGMENTS

When someone is caught in a sin, the Bible wants us to “form a conclusion” about the danger of that sin and lovingly point it out.

Read Galatians 6:1; 2 Timothy 2:25; and James 5:19,20.

What do these passages urge us to keep in mind as we go about this eternity-changing task? _____

Read John 7:24.

List instances when judging is inappropriate. _____

GOD’S JUDGMENT

Some mistakenly think that God does not judge. John 12:47 says, “If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.”

It is true! Jesus’ first coming was not for judgment, but for salvation. Jesus came to take the judgment of God for all sinners on himself so that we would not have to suffer it. Yet, the Bible is clear that we can reject that salvation through impenitence (Hebrews 10:26).

But the Bible also talks about Jesus as judge.

Read John 12:48 and Acts 17:31

What false ideas do people hold when they think God does not judge?

If God did not judge, what negative consequences would there be for our lives?

OUR JUDGMENT

Read Matthew 18:15-22.

Notice how Jesus wants us to keep another’s sin as private as possible, only widening those who know when lesser measures are rejected. After each step, if the person repents, you forgive, and the process stops. Even when the final measure is rejected and impenitence sets that person outside the church, Jesus wants us to treat him as a pagan or a tax collector.

What does that mean? Remember how Jesus treated pagans and tax collectors. He dealt with them as unbelievers who needed to be won over!

Based on our study, respond to the following people:

“That church kicked me out!” _____

“Haven’t you heard ‘Love your neighbor as yourself?’” _____

“This is my life! I don’t poke my nose into your life and judge you!” _____

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

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

For better or worse, Christmas is filled with traditions. Some of these traditions help celebrate Jesus' birth—the Christmas Eve candlelight service or the children's Christmas service, for example. Others may be more worldly, but they still help unite a family. My father-in-law "forgot" his keys each Christmas Eve when my husband and his siblings were young, so he had to run back inside before the family left for worship. When they arrived home later, their gifts would be under the tree. I love that story because it was a tradition filled with love.

So . . . what happens this year? So many things are already different. It's likely that your Christmas is going to look different too. Of course, you can still celebrate your Savior's birth, but . . . how exactly? Read these two articles to help your family adjust its celebration.

— Nicole Balza

WHAT IF WE CAN'T FOLLOW OUR CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS THIS YEAR?

IT WAS A STRANGE Christmas Eve. A sad Christmas Eve. A disappointing Christmas Eve. But it also had the potential to be the best Christmas Eve ever.

I'm thinking of the first Christmas Eve my wife and I experienced as empty nesters. That night the nest felt especially empty. Our daughters were with their families, hours away from our home. We were alone.

When we arrived home after worship, there was no scurry to set out snacks in the living room. There was no daughter laughter. No hugs. No anticipation about the gifts under the tree. No celebration of the love my family shares. Absent was the joy and excitement that made Christmas Eve our "most wonderful time of the year."

Christmas 2020 has the potential to shatter your treasured holiday traditions.

However, the night had the potential to help us create a new empty-nest tradition, one we could treasure for decades to come.

But we created nothing.

Rather than sitting together in the living room in the glow of the tree lights, Sharon and I sat in the television room bathed in big screen LED light. We opened no presents. We didn't regale each other with cherished holiday memories.

We could have launched new Christmas Eve traditions. We could have opened albums with Christmas photos and celebrated the blessings God has given us in our children. We could have invited others who, like us, were without family. We could have taken couple-time with the Christmas story: reading it, talking about it, praying over it. We could have used Christmas Eve to sharpen our focus on Christ's birth. We could have. But we didn't.

We didn't because we did not prepare for that evening. We didn't use the days before to talk about our sense of loss or the options we could explore. We didn't identify our new opportunities and plan ways to capture them.

Christmas 2020 has the potential to shatter your treasured holiday traditions. COVID-19 may threaten the ways we have celebrated Jesus' birth in the past. The grief of death and divorce may destroy your Christmas customs. Job loss may package frustration, not presents, beneath your Christmas tree.

The solution? Learn from what Sharon and I should have done:

- Choose to focus on how the baby born in Bethlehem guarantees that all things must work for our good. Pray with each other for the Spirit to help you trust that truth.
- Make time to talk with your family about how this Christmas will be different.
- Name and grieve over the family traditions you

have lost. Be real with each other about how you will feel this Christmas.

- Talk about how developing different family traditions is normal. For example, chances are the family traditions you and your spouse grew up with are different than those you and your children have developed.
- Brainstorm ways to highlight the reason for the season in your celebrations. Bring a sharper focus on Jesus' birth into your home.

Nothing can take away Christmas' "good news of great joy" that "a Savior has been born." So embrace your new normal. Waiting for you are other ways to make this the "most wonderful time of the year."



James Aderman and his wife, Sharon, raised three daughters and are now enjoying their grandchildren.

CHRISTMAS IS ALL about connection. Jesus connected with humanity by taking on human flesh and living among us. He told stories to connect people to truth, and he reconnected sick people with health and healing. Ultimately, he connected us to God for all eternity. Sin separates, but Christ connects.

We celebrate that connection every Christmas by connecting with each other. We step into each other's houses, shake off the snow, and give big, long hugs. We ooh and ah at the tree, exchange gifts, laugh hard, and eat too many cookies. And we worship! We crowd into pews, sing loudly, and then sit quietly, letting Word and song wash over us together.

As I write this, we're in a state of disconnection. Countries are locking down again, limiting gatherings, enforcing curfews, disconnecting people to stifle the virus. More locally, my neighbor is sick. I leave what she needs inside her door, but I don't go in, because I have family members who need to be protected. She understands, but it's heart wrenching.

Disconnection is unnatural, and forced disconnection feels like an abridgment of freedom. Part of me says, "Where's the love?" and "You're not the boss of me!" But the more mature part of me realizes that right now, temporary disconnection is a token of love.

So what happens if we can't connect physically with our families this Christmas? We'll just have to connect in other ways. Here are a few to contemplate:

- **Facetime or Zoom.** Set up the phone or tablet so Grandma and Grandpa can watch the gift opening and sing along with the hymns. (Do a test run ahead

of time, so it all goes smoothly. And remember to talk loudly!)

- **Call and text.** If Zoom is a bridge too far, you can still call and text throughout the day. Call to say thanks for the jeans. Put the phone on speaker and let Uncle Jeff read Luke 2 after supper. Text "I love you" before bed.
- **Share pictures all day long.** Send both the idyllic shots (fresh-faced family in front of the tree) and the real-life shots (Dad's weird sweater, little Sophie's sobs because she didn't get a pony).
- **Prepare the same dinner menu.** Everybody make the Christmas kielbasa, Great-Grandma's schaum torte, and Uncle Brad's "Orange Jeromes."
- **Follow a schedule.** Though you're at separate houses, follow the same plan. Worship at 9 (maybe you can even "attend" the same service virtually if you're not able to be there in person), lunch at noon, gifts at 1 (with matching socks for everyone), walk at 2, Hallmark movie at 3 (with a movie bingo game).
- **Let Amazon and Etsy do the shipping.** Shop online and have gifts delivered. Maybe this year's wrapping paper is brown cardboard. Would that be so terrible for one year?

Even if we're temporarily disconnected due to COVID-19, we're connected to each other in Christ.

- **Send a few things yourself ahead of time:** an Advent calendar, a photo collage of Christmases past, a batch of fudge, an essential oil so you're all enjoying the same scent on Christmas. Yes, this takes a little planning and postage, but you're not traveling or spending money on gas, so it's not a difficult trade-off. (My first year in college, my mom sent me a fully decorated mini-Christmas tree. I owe her.)

Even if we're temporarily disconnected due to COVID-19, we're connected to each other in Christ. Those are not just words. Christ is here with us, right this second. And on Christmas, he'll be sitting at each Christian's dinner table as he always does, chuckling at the collapsed dessert, enjoying the out-of-tune piano.

I hope we can be physically together this Christmas, but if we can't, we'll be okay. We know that soon we'll be connected again, and in Jesus we're connected forever!



Laurie Gauger-Hested and her husband, Michael, have a blended family that includes her two adult children and his teenage son.



A startling medical diagnosis brings a family closer to God. | Alicia A. Neumann

MY CHRISTIAN *life*

CHRONIC PAIN. Constant exhaustion. Medications. Physical therapy. Surgery after surgery. This is the reality for 16-year-old Bailey Seal, member at Immanuel, Manitowoc, Wis. Bailey was diagnosed four years ago with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS), a genetic condition with no cure. Although each day is difficult, Bailey keeps a positive attitude. “When people ask me how I deal with this, I say that I go to God for help,” she says.

GETTING A DIAGNOSIS

Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome affects the connective tissues in the body, which can result in overly flexible joints and fragile skin. The severity of the symptoms can vary from person to person. Bailey, for example, has joints that are extremely flexible and move far beyond the normal range of motion. Each day her body has to work very hard to keep her joints stable, but even with that extra effort, Bailey says that her knees, ankles, shoulders, wrists, or fingers can dislocate more than 20 times per day. For Bailey, each day is filled with pain and exhaustion.

Before she was diagnosed with EDS, however, Bailey was living life like a normal 12-year-old. “I loved playing sports and going out to do stuff with my friends,” she says. But by the time she was 13, things started becoming difficult for her.

Bailey’s mom, Amanda, clearly remembers the day Bailey was diagnosed with EDS. “We went in for just an ordinary doctor visit and right away the doctor said, ‘Hold on, something else is wrong. You need to go see a geneticist because I think you have Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome.’”

Because some types of EDS are inherited and passed from parent to child, Amanda was also tested; the results showed that both she and Bailey have EDS. “It was a slap in the face; we weren’t expecting something so drastic,” Amanda says. Amanda had been dealing with health issues since she was a teenager, but her symptoms had always been dismissed or explained away. Now, it all made sense. “It’s like a light bulb turned on,” she says.

After the diagnosis, Amanda began aggressive treatment for her own

EDS and carefully watched Bailey’s developing symptoms. “Any time she said that a joint didn’t feel right, we jumped on it right away,” says Amanda. “We never dismiss anything she says.”

MAKING ADJUSTMENTS

Armed with knowledge about their condition, the Seals modified their lifestyle to make it less stressful on their joints. For example, they identified things in their day-to-day lives that could cause a fall—something that happens easily when their ankles, knees, or hips dislocate. “We’ve designed our house so there are no rugs lying around,” says Amanda. If she does fall, Amanda says her husband helps catch her. “He doesn’t have EDS, but he’s learned the signs and symptoms. He helps us significantly.”

Bailey also has a great support system at school. She attends Manitowoc Lutheran High School with a group of friends whom she’s known since preschool. They help her with day-to-day activities like opening her locker and getting to class. When Bailey was diagnosed, her friends

were very nervous and worried about her condition, but Bailey says they are used to it now. Every so often, a new friend gets scared when Bailey's joints dislocate. "Then we sit down and have a chat and explain to them what's going on," says Amanda. "Then they feel more comfortable and at ease."

Bailey also needed to make modifications to her school schedule. She can no longer participate in gym class, and sitting or standing for long periods can be very painful for her. So her teachers allow Bailey to leave class when she's not feeling well, and they excuse her from class a little bit early each day so she can avoid getting bumped by other kids in the halls. When Bailey has surgery, they help her find alternatives for completing assignments and exams, if needed. "One of Bailey's teachers even brought her homework home for her," says Amanda. "You don't see teachers do that. They are really caring."

Amanda says she's so grateful for how adaptable and helpful the school has been. "When we contact them about the modifications Bailey needs, they say, 'Okay, all she has to do is this,'" says Amanda. "Manitowoc Lutheran has just been so wonderful."

ONGOING CHALLENGES

In addition to navigating the day-to-day challenges, Bailey also has to deal with ongoing surgeries to repair her deteriorating joints. She's had four surgeries in the past four years, and another one is coming up. "Surgeries help me have a semi-normal life," says Bailey. Unfortunately, the surgeries only help for so long. In between surgeries, Bailey relies on pain medications and wears braces to support her joints.

Amanda, who has already had nine surgeries in her life, says living with this condition has been challenging,



(Left) Bailey and her therapy dog, Queenie. Queenie alerts people if Bailey falls and also helps relieve her anxiety. (Right) Bailey and her best friend, Kaitlyn. (Opposite page) The Seal family: Elena, Amanda, Bailey, and Bob.

and she realizes it is worse for Bailey, whose symptoms are more severe. Amanda says Bailey's younger sister is also starting to have some symptoms and will likely be diagnosed with EDS when she is older.

"It's so hard to watch your children be in pain day after day, to watch them not do the activities they love or miss out on joining their friends because their bodies can't handle it," she says.

Since there's a 50 percent chance that the gene that causes EDS could be passed down, Bailey has already decided not to have her own biological children. Although it's heartbreaking, Bailey's family supports her decision. "We understand," says Amanda. "And since Bailey loves dogs, we'll have grand-dogs instead of grand-kids—and we're good with that."

RELYING ON GOD

Amanda says this experience has strengthened her relationship with God. "Before my diagnosis I would pray to God, asking him to take away my pain. Now I pray that he allows me to get the tasks done that need to be done for the day. I pray that he keeps our daughters strong and doesn't let their joints break from having EDS.

I pray that they never lose faith in Jesus or be angry that they have EDS. I pray that he will never give them more than what they can handle."

Bailey says this syndrome has changed her. "At first, I was really angry at God for letting this happen to me. But now I know that he is using all these problems to bring me closer to him," she says.

This is especially true on her hardest days. "Sometimes my pain gets really bad to the point I want to cry, and I have a really high pain tolerance," she says. So she tries to focus on the things she loves—like drawing, singing, and playing drums.

But she says that the thing that always helps is when she turns to God. "I trust that God will take care of me and will help me get through this. I know that EDS is a lifelong thing, but I trust that God will never leave me alone. One day he will take me to heaven, and I won't have to worry about which joint is going to dislocate next."



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

Unprecedented

“COVID-19 pandemic, an ‘unprecedented wake-up call’ for all inhabitants of Mother Earth.”

“Unprecedented damage by COVID-19 requires an unprecedented policy response.”

“Unprecedented!” The word screams at me from the headlines and makes me scratch my head and wonder aloud: “I thought the dictionary definition for *unprecedented* was ‘never done or known before.’ ”

Would those who lived through the horrors of the H1N1 pandemic of 1918 agree that our current pandemic is “unprecedented”? The so-called Spanish flu claimed some 50 million lives worldwide and 675,000 in the United States alone.

And what about the generations who lived through the nightmare of the Black Death in Europe, which peaked around A.D. 1350? It is estimated that some 75 million to 200 million—or about 30 to 60 percent of the population—succumbed. So many died so quickly that one historian in Florence, Italy, recorded, “All the citizens did little else except to carry dead bodies to be buried. . . . At every church they dug deep pits down to the water-table; and thus those who were poor who died during the night were bundled up quickly and thrown into the pit. In the morning . . . they took some earth and shoveled it down on top of them; and later others were placed on top of them and then another layer of earth, just as one makes lasagna with layers of pasta and cheese.”*

Ghoulish recipe indeed! But not unprecedented.

It’s not even close to the deadliest pandemic our world has seen. That distinction belongs to the plague that has swept away every generation since the beginning of time. St. Paul explains, “Just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, so also death spread to all people because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). Every person we will greet this day—or meet along the pathway of our lives—will one day die.

No vaccine will prevent it. No social distancing will stem the tide. Forget about a mask. It will

do no good. Nor will the pious Christmas platitude shared all-too-often automatically: “Peace on earth.”

The only cure for our 100-percent-deadly sin plague had to be unprecedented.

We needed a champion who would crush the serpent’s head and, along with that, the deadly bite of death and hell affecting each one of us (Genesis 3:15). Unprecedented.

We needed a child who would break the curse of inherited sin. A child promised to a scheming king, Ahaz, who deserved no promise at all: “Therefore the Lord himself will give a sign for all of you. Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and name him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Unprecedented.

We needed the only Son, begotten from eternity, who, “though he was by nature God, . . . did not consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed, but he emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant” (Philippians 2:6,7). Unprecedented.

That first Christmas, our heavenly Father used Caesar Augustus’ census decree to bring Joseph and his pregnant wife, Mary, to the sleepy little village of Bethlehem. “So it was that while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger” (Luke 2:6,7).

In the manger lies a gift of pure grace for you and me—something “never done or known before.” Unprecedented.



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.

*historytoday.com/archive/black-death-greatest-catastrophe-ever

Bringing the Word to Bogotá

Since 2015, the Academia Cristo website, academiacristo.com, has been providing Bible classes, worship services, training for church planters, and other tools for Spanish speakers to study God's Word. The program also includes a phone app and a social media presence, making it easy for Academia Cristo users to share the tool with others. This story highlights how one believer used Academia Cristo to share the gospel with his brother—even though they are separated by 1,500 miles.

In 2002, a job opportunity took Luis "Lucho" Herrera from his home in Bogotá, Colombia, to Florida. When he and his wife, Adriana, were looking for a religious school for their son, they enrolled him at Divine Savior Lutheran Academy in Doral. At the school orientation meeting, Pastor Carl Leyrer invited the parents to Bible class. At Adriana's urging, they enrolled, and that experience changed Lucho's life.

Lucho's Catholic upbringing had emphasized sin and guilt and salvation by works—but not grace. "Once I started studying God's Word, I found the truth," he says. "Only Christ—by what he did—is the way to heaven. My motivation became love, not guilt. My thinking switched 180 degrees."

Lucho soon began taking multiple Bible classes through *Academia Cristo*. Armed with the gospel, he couldn't wait to share with the people he loved most—his family back in Colombia. He initially bought Bibles for them, but he wanted to do more. He kept thinking about the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus, and how he needed to share God's Word with his family while there was still time.

"That parable struck me really, really hard," he admits. "The rich man was in hell, and I hadn't done anything to

share the truth with my family so they wouldn't end up like the rich man. I had the tools. I was now challenged to follow Jesus' mandate to look for more souls."

One of the tools that Lucho used was the *Academia Cristo* phone app. He sent the app to his brother, Camilo, asking Camilo to install it on their mother's phone. In the process, Camilo became intrigued. He and Lucho started talking about the Bible, often for hours. "What Camilo knew about the Bible was what someone else had interpreted, but not actually what the Bible said," recalls Lucho. So he encouraged Camilo to install the app on his own phone and start taking Bible classes.

Camilo did just that, leading him down the path to a clearer understanding of sin and grace and Jesus' sacrifice to remove guilt. He enrolled in class after class through *Academia Cristo*, eagerly studying God's Word.

After being further taught and nurtured by several local pastors, Camilo was confirmed and is now sharing the gospel with his family and friends. He also is working with church leaders to help start a church in Bogotá. "Everyone is a sinner, but God sent Jesus to save us," he says. "I found hope."

Camilo becomes emotional when talking about his brother sharing the gospel with him: "I want to thank my older brother, Lucho. He knocked and knocked and helped bring me out of the darkness. Before, my soul was weighted as a rock. Now my soul is light like a feather." Camilo also is deeply grateful to *Academia Cristo* for reaching out to the lost sheep of Latin America.

Through their experience, the Herrera brothers stress the importance of relationships—you can't just send people the *Academia Cristo* tool and walk away. "You have to put effort in," says Lucho. Like any relationship, the more time you spend the better it gets.

Lucho and Camilo Herrera now have a bond that is stronger than the blood shared by brothers. By God's grace, they share an eternal bond through the saving blood of Jesus.

LEARN MORE > about *Academia Cristo* in this month's edition of *WELS Connection*.



(Left to right) Lucho, Julia (their mother), and Camilo Herrera

DO YOU KNOW Spanish speakers who want to learn more about Jesus? Direct them to academiacristo.com to get them started.

 **WELS CONNECTIONS**

Creating digital side doors

Did you know that more than 104 million Americans listened to podcasts in the last month? This growing number of people are consuming content from more than 1.5 million shows on topics ranging from food to crimebusting to religion.

“I think the appeal for most people is that it’s on-demand, focused radio,” says Martin Spriggs, WELS chief technology officer and cohost of the WELS Tech podcast. “You’re not at the will and whim of the broadcaster and their choices, but you can laser focus on things that you’re interested in.”

But what does that mean for ministry and spreading the gospel? Peter Hagen, pastor at Resurrection, Maumee, Ohio, says that his goal with his Raised with Jesus podcast is to create a digital side door—a way for someone to get acquainted with the church and its teachings—and then connect the digital to the physical—a way for someone to contact the pastor and congregation to learn more.

“Most people check out a church online before they walk through the door for the first time,” says Hagen. “A consistent, quality podcast can bridge the gap. People can have repeated exposure to the Word of God and to the teaching that is provided at your church without any extra effort on their part.”

Then by providing in his podcast his contact information, the church’s service times, and a link to the WELS Yearbook for listeners not in the area, Hagen gives listeners opportunities to connect physically with a pastor or congregation.

Hagen became interested in podcasting about five years ago. One of his members at his former church, Shepherd of the Lakes, Fairmont, Minn., a plumber

by trade, listened to podcasts non-stop when working, consuming hours of programming a day. “He said, ‘Pastor Hagen, you gotta get into this,’” says Hagen.

Hagen discovered that the bar for starting a podcast can be quite low. “Someone with a smartphone and nine dollars a month can host a podcast and make use of the digital materials a congregation is likely already producing,” he says. Hagen started by recording his sermons,

Bible classes, and even catechism classes. When he took his call to Maumee in 2018, he added Sunday school lessons, guest content, and topical series to the mix. “For the input of about 20 minutes a day, I regularly get 50 to 150 downloads a day,” he says. “A number of people might not come to Bible class on a given Sunday, but they will tune in for their commute.”

He continues, “For me, the podcast was a way to get Bible reading into my folks’ homes. When people have those minutes of solitude during their commute, they can pull up the podcast and have 10 minutes with Jesus that day.” He says he also recommends podcast episodes to potential members as a way to extend his Bible information classes.

An added benefit is that podcasts are easily shareable, allowing members a simple, non-intimidating way to witness. “I have a number of members who told me they share the podcasts with somebody,” says Hagen. The congregation even developed podcast “business cards” to hand to people who like to listen to podcasts, people like the branch manager of Hagen’s local bank. “I had a chance not to have just a five-minute gospel presentation in her office when I was refinancing my loan but for her to hear a daily presentation of the gospel [through my podcast],” he says.

LEARN MORE > about other WELS podcasts in future issues of the magazine. Have a podcast you want highlighted? Let us know at forwardinchrist.net/submissions. Listen to the Raised with Jesus podcast at bit.ly/tenminuteseveryday. Learn more about digital side doors at forwardinchrist.net/creating-digital-side-doors.

*podcastinsights.com/podcast-statistics/



PODCAST

A radio show that you stream or download and listen to using your computer, tablet, or smartphone. There are more than 1.5 million shows and 34 million episodes in this growing field.

RAISED WITH JESUS

A BIBLICALLY LUTHERAN PODCAST FOR TOLEDO AND BEYOND

Colorado church receives relief from fires

“At our final outdoor worship service at Carbon Valley Lutheran we could see the smoke coming across the sky, and by the end of worship we had ash and burnt pine needles on our cars,” describes Tim Spiegelberg, pastor at Carbon Valley, Firestone, Colo., and also vacancy pastor at Peace, Boulder.

While Colorado is no stranger to wildfires, 2020 brought some of the biggest and longest lasting in the state’s history. As the fires closed in, four families from Peace, Boulder, were told to evacuate.

Two of the families needed a place to go, and without hesitation, the council at Peace opened the doors

of the church, allowing the members to stay as needed. Carbon Valley assisted as well, providing gift cards for necessities. Unsure of how widespread, long, or damaging these fires would be, Spiegelberg turned to WELS Christian Aid and Relief, seeking assistance before the crisis got bigger. Christian Aid and Relief answered the call and provided additional funds to help families if needed.

Spiegelberg explains, “It was incredibly easy working with Pastor Dan Sims [director of WELS Christian Aid and Relief]. It was as simple as a phone call describing the situation, and [Sims] gave me the assurance that Christian Aid and Relief was there for us.”

“I think the story here is moving swiftly with compassion before things get out of hand,” says Spiegelberg. “It turned out that those families were okay. They were able to go back. God sent snow and stopped the progression of fire. But we were in place and ready to go.”

After a record fire season—not just in Colorado but on the West coast as well—Sims says he will be meeting with pastors from the fire-hit regions to brainstorm the best ways for Christian Aid and Relief to assist with these disasters in the future.

LEARN MORE AT wels.net/relief.

YOUR LIFE HAS MEANING

From business success to health to basic activities that give us joy and fulfillment, the events of the past year have—even temporarily—robbed us of what we think makes life worth living.

Your Life Has Meaning: Discovering Your Role in an Epic Story by Luke George Thompson couldn’t have come at a more appropriate time.

Using the illustration of sitting in a “broken chair,” Thompson—a WELS pastor and former philosophy professor—takes the reader on an exploration of what appears to be the pointlessness of life. Much like sitting in that broken chair, our efforts appear to be wasted as we wait for it to fall apart.

Yet, while tearing down worldly values with fierce abandon for pages on end, Thompson does an excellent job of bringing the conversation back to where it needs to be—God’s Word.

One would expect a book about the meaning of life from a philosophy professor to be tedious and dry, but I was pleasantly surprised that this was not the case. *Your Life Has Meaning* is a punchy, accessible book. Clocking in at only six chapters, the author deconstructs the common things that most people aspire to have or do in this world.

However, he is careful to emphasize that these aspirations do hold value and are not bad—but they

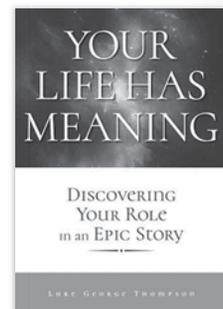
do not give life meaning in the way that people think.

Like any good teacher, he makes the material accessible on the reader’s level using both philosophy heavyweights and examples from current pop culture. Where else can you view life through the perspective of Albert Camus, Tim Ferriss, Brad Paisley, *Lord of the Rings*, Friedrich Nietzsche, Neil Degrasse Tyson, the Philadelphia Eagles, and Death Cab for Cutie?

In the end, Thompson breaks down the biblical view of life’s meaning in the seemingly-contradictory chapter titled, “Everything is Meaningful,” where he focuses on three simple words: *Remember your Creator*.

Your Life Has Meaning is a great book for anyone who is struggling with hope and meaning in their lives or for people who simply want to dip their toes into philosophy in a very accessible and biblically-focused manner. Personally, this book is going to hold a spot on my bookshelf for years to come.

Tom Meitner
Germantown, Wisconsin



\$17.99

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

The power of God's Word

"Don't ever downplay what God can do through his Word. It's dynamite, pure dynamite."

When asked about lessons he has learned in his ministry, Mark Cares, founder of Truth in Love Ministry, says the biggest thing that has been cemented in his mind is to rely on the power of the Word. "I've seen the amazing way God changes Christians to witness and the amazing way he works on Mormons' hearts," he says. "God's Word is so powerful."

On Truth in Love Ministry's 15th anniversary, Cares is reflecting on the development of a ministry that now touches more than 1 million people every month through its social media and other platforms. And it started with a man who knew nothing about Mormonism.

When Cares took a call to Messiah, Nampa, Idaho, in 1981, he didn't even know there were Mormons in the area—until he and his congregation started reaching out in the neighborhood. "We hit a lot of Mormons," he says. "We thought, *Hey, what are we going to do here?*"

Cares says he started researching. "I read all the books. I tried all the

methods. Almost every technique was basically debating Mormonism," he says. But Cares saw that this was not working.

He took a sabbatical in the late 1980s and developed a new method for reaching Mormons with the truth of God's Word. It resulted in his release of a book, *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons*, in 1993, which was declared one of the most influential books of the year by the then biggest Christian radio talk show in the nation.

"The principles are still our basic principles," says Cares. "Don't debate Mormonism, but witness Christ."

Recognizing that Mormons are the victims and not the enemies and learning how to speak their language—"I think I developed the term, *Mormonese*," says Cares, laughing—are two of the main tenets espoused by the book.

Cares continued serving his congregation while developing this new ministry, until in 2005, he and his congregation started the non-profit, WELS-affiliated ministry with two goals: Proclaim Christ to Mormons and empower Christians to witness.



DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE

Jon Leach, new president of Truth in Love Ministry, is excited about the future of the ministry.

While on-the-street witnessing in the US is still part of the plans, Leach says where Truth in Love Ministry is really taking off is online. "It has now become a global outreach ministry," he says. Last year, the ministry shared over 10 million gospel messages worldwide in every recognized country around the world. More than three thousand Mormons recently have signed up for regular Christian devotions, and the ministry has equipped active Christian witnesses in 61 different countries—and that's just scratching the surface of what is possible.

"Whether it's direct outreach to the lost or equipping Christians to witness, God has provided extraordinary ways through technology to share the message of grace with those who need it most," says Leach.

LEARN MORE > about Truth in Love Ministry at tilm.org.

Since then, Truth in Love Ministry has trained thousands of Christians to witness—either in door-to-door “boot camps” held in highly-populated Mormon cities or right in their own homes to the Mormon missionaries who knock on their doors.

The Lord has blessed the ministry, with Christian churches and ministries all over the world using its materials. “I think we’ve had an impact in wider Christianity, at least in this little niche of reaching out,” says Cares.



Mark Cares on the radio.

He continues, “I think one of the hardest things for all of us is we don’t know what is going to happen [after we witness]. It’s hard to do follow up from a distance.” That’s why all the training emphasizes John chapter 4, which highlights the joy of sowing. “You throw out the seed, and you say, ‘Okay, Lord, take it from here.’”

Cares retired as president of Truth in Love Ministry this fall but continues to serve there part time.

“My ministry was like having front-row seats at an NBA basketball game and getting to see all the dunks up close,” says Cares. “It’s about watching God do amazing things, and I got the front-row seat.”

SEE MORE > stories from Cares’ ministry at forwardinchrist.net/the-power-of-gods-word.

District news

MICHIGAN

On Sept. 27, **Good Shepherd, Alma, Mich.**, held a mortgage-burning celebration.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

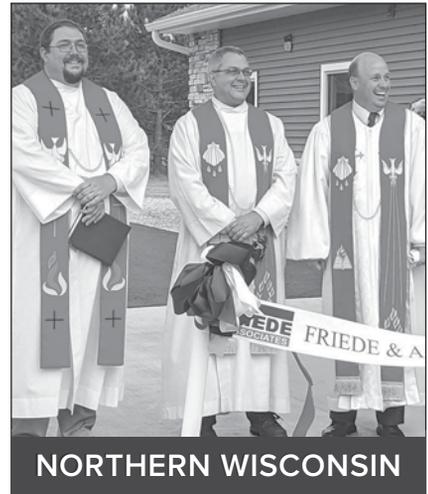
D-M—Redeemer, Pierre, S.D., is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

The **Dakota-Montana District** is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2020. The district spans 1,200 miles and is home to 70 congregations.

Great Plains Lutheran High School, Watertown, S.D., is celebrating its 25th anniversary this school year.

NW—On Oct. 11, St. Matthew, Stoddard, Wis., celebrated its 150th anniversary.

The district reporters for this month are: D-M—Andrew Hussman; MI—John Eich; MN—James Panning; NW—Dennis Kleist; SC—Andrew Retberg.



NORTHERN WISCONSIN

On Sept. 27, St. Paul’s, Adams-Friendship, Wis., dedicated its new worship facility. This location is part of a multi-site ministry with St. Paul’s, Mauston, Wis. Pictured are the congregation’s three pastors (from left)—Jasper Sellnow, Joseph Fricke, and Russell “Chip” Wilke III.



SOUTH CENTRAL

Christ the Rock, Hutto, Texas, dedicated its new worship facility on Sept. 27. WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc., provided grants and loans for the property and the construction of this home mission’s new church.



MINNESOTA

Volunteers from Pilgrim, Minneapolis, Minn., shop, pack, and deliver bags of food to members and neighbors who are not able to shop during the pandemic. Pictured is the McAghon family.



PHOTO | Lightstock

PLEASE EXPLAIN

Is heaven going to be boring? | Justin C. Cloute

THE WORDS OF the young woman in confirmation class kind of hit me by surprise: “Heaven just seems like it is going to be so boring!”

I have to admit: I didn’t know how to respond. I had recently visited several Christians who were near death, and I could see the excitement and joy of heaven in their eyes. How could she say this? Then I remembered my own childhood imaginations—admittedly influenced more by Saturday morning cartoons than Holy Scripture. I recalled floating around on clouds and singing really long hymns all day!

Even as adults our visions of heaven are not much better. In fact, sometimes heaven is simply pictured as getting whatever we desire. The football fan gets to spend eternity attending the most exciting games ever played. The chocolate lover gets to taste every variety of cocoa

blended into the perfect ratio of bitter and sweet without ever gaining weight. The outdoorsman gets to spend his time hiking in the mountains and exploring their glacier-tinted lakes and waterfalls. The golfer gets to play the most perfectly manicured courses imaginable and every shot is a hole in one. While these pictures may help us grasp the joys of heaven, they are not a complete picture of what God has waiting for his people.

Scripture refers to heaven in many ways. It is described as a wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14), a house with many rooms (John 14:2,3), a better country (Hebrews 11:16), the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2), and paradise (Luke 23:43), just to name a few. It is a place of life filled with joy, peace, and rest. Central to this life is experiencing perfect union with God and the enjoyment of his presence.

The problem with these pictures of heaven is that they depict primarily a fulfillment of our earthly desires. But in heaven our desires will be so in line with God’s desires that the two will become one. We will want what God wants and find joy in his glory. This is why praising God in heaven will not in any way be “boring.”

The descriptions of heaven do not tell us all that we may want to know. Instead we are given pictures, parables, and metaphors. This shouldn’t surprise us as language has difficulty describing things that are not part of our shared human experience. For example, imagine traveling back to the Middle Ages and describing an airplane. You could say, “It’s like a bird that flies through the sky and carries people like a giant ship, but it also has wheels like a wagon.” Your listeners might

get the general idea, but if you asked them to draw a picture of an airplane, it wouldn't look much like a Boeing 747. Maybe you've experienced how words often fall short as you've tried to share a beautiful or inspiring experience with friends. They really had to be there to get it! While we live here on earth, we can never imagine how wonderful heaven will be.

HEAVEN IS ABOUT BEING ACCEPTED

It's not just the catchy melody that made the theme song for the 1980s TV series *Cheers* a hit. The lyrics resonate with this deep human desire to be welcomed: "Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got. Taking a break from all your worries sure

This is the place you dream of but can't describe. Forgiven, accepted, loved. Even though you have never been here before, everybody knows your name, and your heavenly Father welcomes you as his beloved child.

HEAVEN IS ABOUT THE ABSENCE OF SIN

Consider the description of the believer's final destination in the apostle John's vision. John heard a voice from the throne of God announce one of the most beloved descriptions of the believer's final destination: "God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their

While we live here on earth, we can never imagine how wonderful heaven will be.

would help a lot. Wouldn't you like to get away?" Then the triumphant chorus breaks out: "Sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came. You wanna go where people know people are all the same. You wanna go where everybody knows your name." We want to go where people know our name.

On the Last Day, "the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world'" (Matthew 25:34). Our Savior accepts us because he removed our sins by his sacrifice and welcomes us into an inheritance that existed before we were even born.

eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:3,4).

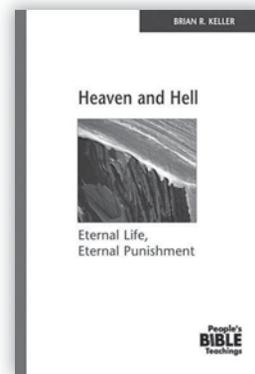
For those who have shed tears of regret and loneliness, for those who have suffered pain and stared death in the face, this is the place where all those things are gone. Since the root cause of it all, sin, has been removed by the Lamb of God, so then have all of its consequences.

HEAVEN IS ABOUT BEING WITH GOD

God himself will be with his people. The Creator of heaven and earth will wipe every tear from the eyes of his people in the new heavens and the new earth. Things will be very different from how they are

FOR FURTHER READING

Heaven and Hell: Eternal Life, Eternal Punishment by Brian R. Keller. Available from Northwestern Publishing House, nph.net; 800-662-6022.



now. "Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Here is something that is anything but boring. In heaven you will need no words to know God because you will see him face-to-face. You will stare into the face of the One who hung the stars in the sky and wrote the instructions for every cell in your body. There's no judgment because sin and guilt are gone. The God who knit you together in your mother's womb, who was with you every step of the way, and who knows exactly who you are and how you have failed him in so many ways, loves you anyway. He loves you because of his Son, and you will be his child forever.



Justin Cloute is pastor at St. Luke's, Watertown, Wisconsin.



CHRIST'S *return* IS IMMINENT

The day of judgment brings an end to all the world's evil and trouble.

Matthew D. Kimmel

December is upon us. We've journeyed through a whirlwind of a year filled with tumult, uncertainty, and stress, and now we, as Christians, return to the familiar pattern of preparing for Christmas. It's Advent, a time to prepare our hearts for the coming of our Lord.

But Advent has a double theme. Not only do we take this time to prepare for Jesus' nativity, but we also remember that Jesus has promised to return. This time, he won't come resting in a hay-lined feeding trough or riding a lowly donkey as he did in his first advent. Instead he will come bursting from the clouds with great power and glory.

THE SIGNS OF HIS COMING

The Bible tells us that Christ's return is near (James 5:8,9), but his disciples long ago also thought his return was near. In Matthew 24, the disciples asked Jesus to identify the signs of his coming. Jesus outlined signs in nature (famines and earthquakes) and signs in society (nations warring against one another and the love of most growing cold). He also described signs within the Christian church, including intense persecution of Christians, the appearance of false prophets and messiahs, and a great number of believers falling away. Finally, the "gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (Matthew 24:14).

As we examine the signs that Jesus listed, which of them have yet to be fulfilled? None of them! In many

ways, every one, in fact, has been fulfilled many times over throughout the New Testament era. Jesus could return at any moment! Indeed, Christ's return is imminent.

JESUS WILL COME TO JUDGE

The Bible doesn't satisfy every curiosity Christians may have about the day of Jesus' return, but it does tell exactly what Jesus' purpose in coming will be: When Jesus returns, he will judge all humanity—both the living and the dead (Matthew 25:31-46).

Sadly, many Christians harbor false ideas about Jesus' return. Many passages in Scripture speak of these future events. Some passages are crystal clear, while others are, shall we say, a bit murky. We, as Lutherans, are careful first to examine the clear verses of Scripture and then, in their light, to examine the murkier passages.

"Your redemption"

Some misguided Christians look to the murkier passages first and then go back and reinterpret the clearer passages. As a result, they read sections of Scripture like Matthew 24:40,41 and Revelation 20 and come away with convoluted ideas about a sudden “rapture” taking Christians from the earth and Jesus returning to establish a thousand-year kingdom on earth before judgment day.

This false teaching is called millennialism, and within that teaching are subgroups of pre-millennialists, post-millennialists, and dispensationalists. Sadly, a great many conservative Christians fall into these camps, and a careful observer will find these false teachings in many Christian songs, literature, and media.

But such ideas fly in the face of clear passages like John 18:36 when Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

Thankfully, the Bible gives us a clear and simple picture of the day of Jesus’ return. Just as the angels told the disciples at his ascension, Jesus will return suddenly, coming on the clouds with unimaginable power and glory (Acts 1:11; Matthew 24:30,31; Jude 14,15). His coming will be announced by the thundering voice of the archangel, the deafening sound of trumpets, and the sudden failure of the sun to give forth its light (1 Thessalonians 4:16; Matthew 24:29). As all eyes are fixed on the returning King, the graves of believers and unbelievers alike will open, giving up their dead (John 5:28,29). After all this has taken place, Jesus will judge the world.

All of these will take place on the same day—a day of joy and redemp-

tion for the saints of God and a day of fear and terror for Christ’s enemies.

HIS RETURN COMFORTS US

So, if we can’t know when Jesus’ return will be, why bother studying these things? Because Jesus’ imminent return is a source of great comfort for troubled Christians.

Jesus’ imminent return is a source of great comfort for troubled Christians.

It’s no secret that 2020 has been a year like few others. We’ve seen civil unrest and rebellion against the governing authorities. Society descends further and further into depravity. People insist that one must be wicked in order to be right, one must be crass in order to be proper, one must be hateful in order to be loving. Christians are often portrayed as hateful and bigoted. It seems that Isaiah’s words, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Isaiah 5:20), apply to present times more than ever before. Our world is seemingly turning upside down.

As we look at the world around us, we think, *Surely we’re living in the end times.* And the truth is, we are! But when we watch the world seemingly falling to pieces around us, we don’t sulk or despair. As we and Christians around the world witness this increase of wickedness, we joyfully pick up our crosses and follow Jesus. We know our Savior has promised that he is returning soon. We rejoice that the race is nearly over!

Knowing that Christ’s return will soon be upon us changes more than just our attitudes. As we look at the people around us jockeying to acquire even more property, pleasure, and power, we remember that this world and all that is in it will swiftly pass away. We fix our eyes on the prize of everlasting life that awaits us, purchased for us with the blood of our Savior, and we cling to him as he holds us fast.

Jesus’ return also gives us urgency in our mission as the church to proclaim the gospel to people marching down the path to destruction. Countless souls near and far are in unspeakable danger, and Christ has entrusted us with the saving message of the gospel. What a privilege to carry such sweet news of peace to those who desperately need to hear it—especially in these uncertain and troubling days!

When we consider that Christ’s return is imminent, remember this: Such a day holds no fear for believers. It is a day that will leave us breathless with joy, as we see the fulfillment of these promises of the return of our King! As Jesus encourages us so eloquently, “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28).



Matthew Kimmel is pastor at St. Luke, New Lisbon, Wisconsin.

is drawing near.”



Happy birthday, Brother!

Birthday parties for family members are most often special events—the candles, the cake, the presents, and then the pictures. Years later we trot out the pictures to remember the young face that has changed.

Sometimes we skip birthdays unless they mark another decade of life: 70, 80, 100 might be special birthdays to celebrate.

What about 2020? Yes, I want to pause and celebrate the birth of my Brother Jesus. We might celebrate a couple of years different from what the calendar says. Some suggest that he was born in 4 B.C.

But the date doesn't really matter. What matters is that he was born. He entered the world like all of us, even if his conception was a miracle and the circumstances remarkable. Flesh and blood, born of the virgin Mary—we confess and repeat the story of his birth each year. For these 2020-plus years, we still mark the event.

It was a special event. We announce and celebrate the birth of our children. I think I sent out cards through the mail. Now it's

On this special birthday of our Brother, give thanks that Jesus was born and adopted us as his family.

just an e-mail or a text with a picture attached. God made a point of introducing his Son with some memorable fanfare. The Father sent angels to deliver the birth announcement. They sang to the shepherds in a little, forgotten town called Bethlehem. They were a light so bright in the night it frightened those shepherds at first.

The announcement was stunningly simple and astonishingly profound: "To us a child is born." And what a child: A Savior who is Christ the Lord! Not just a flesh-and-blood baby, but also "the Lord" and a Savior. No wonder we still celebrate his birthday. He is special and deserves our attention.

Over the centuries his family has grown. He is my Brother and yours too. We are all part of his family. So are millions of others. He adopted us. When he had grown to be a man and taught the people in Galilee, he said, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice" (Luke 8:21).

What a Brother we have. He has done what we could not do. He removed the barrier that prevented us from being his brothers and sisters. He shed his blood for us and cleansed us of all sins so we could be his family, sons and daughters of his Father. As his family, though we will be buried at our life's end, our Brother will not forget us. Our graves will be as empty as his was. We are heirs, with eternal life as our inheritance.

And there's more. As our big Brother, he watches out for us, helping us cope with difficulties and challenges and even giving us comfort and courage in the words he has left behind. He listens to our worries, cares for us, and guides all things for the good of his brothers and sisters, "those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

On this special birthday of our Brother, give thanks that Jesus was born and adopted us as his family. He is flesh and blood and knows what it means to be here. He suffered life's challenges, even persecution and death. Talk to him. Trust him. The New Testament calls us his brothers and sisters. Treat other believers as brothers and sisters of Jesus.

Do you have a present for him? A cake? Not too many candles! A song? A quiet thank you? A blessed hope because of him. Perhaps all of these things.

John A. Braun | FIC Editor

the book of James

A BLUEPRINT FOR LIVING OUT OUR LIFE OF FAITH

Richard E. Lauersdorf

PHOTO | iStock

WHAT DIFFERENT descriptions we have for God's Word! It is "a lamp for my feet" (Psalm 119:105), the only sure light in a sin-darkened world. It is "fire" and "hammer" (Jeremiah 23:29), tearing us down by showing our sins and building us up by showing our Savior. It is "seed" (Luke 8:11), which the Spirit sows in our hearts and through which he produces a harvest. It is the "power of God that brings salvation" (Romans 1:16), God's tool for working in the hearts of sinners.

THE WORD OF TRUTH

This remarkable Word filled James with awe and admiration. For him it was the "word of truth" and the "word planted in you, which can save you" (1:18,21).

James knew the importance of the Word. When in his blueprint for Christian living he writes about using the Word of Truth, he's not telling us what we must produce by our own power, but what that Word produces in us. He reminds us that what God's Word asks of us, God's Word acts in us.

There have always been those who fail to do what they hear. Their eyes are on the Word, but not their hearts. They hear with the ears, but not with the soul. Their hearing is like looking into a mirror. They look, walk

away, and forget what they saw (1:23,24). Such hearing is temporary with the truths soon forgotten and the effects soon failing.

THE LAW OF LIBERTY

Hearing with the ears needs to be followed by holding with the heart and then heeding with the life. How different is the hearer who also does this. He looks into and continues in "the perfect law that gives freedom" (1:25).

With this phrase James seems to be referring to the whole Word of God. He has already called it "the word of truth" and "the word planted in you." Now he labels it the "law that gives freedom." Only in that Word can we find the message of the one Savior and Liberator from sin. Only through that message are people set free—free from sin and free for service to God.

Some would have James preach about building our own ladder to heaven with the two-by-fours of our works of the law. No! James knows of only one Liberator, Jesus. He knows of only one ladder, the perfect, complete ladder of Christ's salvation. When James says, "Do," he's repeating what Jesus said in John 6:29, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." Doing means hearing about the

Savior, holding him in faith, and then heeding his Word of truth.

James' words urge us not to be church spectators this Christmas. Don't just watch the shepherds at the manger—kneel with them. Don't just hear the angels sing—join them. Don't just say, "Christ, the Savior, is born"—make it, "Christ, my Savior, is born." Hear, hold, and heed the Christmas gospel. Through it, God would move the Christ Child, our Liberator from sin, out of the stable and into the inn of our hearts and lives.

DIGGING DEEPER

1. How do John 8:31-33; Romans 8:15; and Luke 1:74,75 help explain James' words about "the perfect law that gives freedom"?
2. How do Romans 3:20 and Acts 16:31 rule out using our works to help earn heaven?



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

This is the final article in a six-part series on the book of James.

LEARN MORE AT forwardinchrist.net, including potential answers.

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THINGS TO NOTE

CHANGES IN MINISTRY

Pastors

Bartelt, Derek, to First, Lake Geneva, Wis.

Behmer, Matthew, to One Latin America Team

Behnke, Thomas, to retirement

Mittelstadt, Jeffrey, to retirement

Rathje, Christopher, to Redeemer, Fond du Lac, Wis.

Rothe, Thomas, to retirement

Schreiner, Keith, to St. Paul's, Cannon Falls, Minn.

Strackbein, Philip, to retirement

Uhlhorn, Wayne, to mission counselor for the Board for Home Missions

Teachers

Kuschel, Elizabeth, to Word of Life, Milwaukee, Wis.

Thompson, Monica, to St. Bartholomew, Kawkawlin, Mich.

SYNOD CONVENTION

The 66th biennial convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod will be held July 26–29, 2021, at Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich. The convention delegate fee, paid by the calling body the delegate represents, is \$275. The deadline for submitting memorials to be printed in the *Book of Reports and Memorials* is Jan. 15, 2021. Memorials submitted after Jan. 15 and approved for convention consideration will be posted on the convention website, wels.net/2021synodconvention, if they are received by June 15, 2021. Further directions can be found at wels.net/2021synodconvention.

Send memorials to the President's Office, N16W23377 Stone Ridge Dr, Waukesha WI 53188; carla.martin@wels.net.

NOTICE FOR CONGREGATION TREASURERS AND PASTORS

We thank God for you and for your support of the ministry WELS carries out on behalf of all congregations. We ask that you continue to mail your Congregation Mission Offering (CMO) deposit and its processing coupon to our bank lockbox, which provides effective and efficient deposit processing for the synod. For your CMO payment to be included in reported receipts for the month, it must be received in the synod's bank lockbox on or before the last business day. An exception is made for December offerings. Gifts received by the bank lockbox up to and including Jan. 8, 2021, will be credited as 2020 CMO, if accompanied by a 2020 coupon. Thank you for your assistance.



National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts

WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

save the date

**AUGUST
3–6, 2021**

**CARTHAGE COLLEGE,
KENOSHA, WISCONSIN**

Registration will open next spring. Interested in participating?
Apply to be an instrumentalist or singer at the conference.

*Plans are contingent on the pandemic status in the coming year.

wels.net/worshipconference

CALLED TO *eternal glory*

A reporting of deaths of called workers as noted in the call report. Visit forwardinchrist.net/obituaries.

PASTORS

MARTIN, LEROY A.

Oct. 19, 1943–Oct. 12, 2020

SCHULZ, DALE R.

Nov. 20, 1948–Oct. 7, 2020

TEACHERS AND STAFF MINISTERS

SEBALD, DONALD C.

July 10, 1927–Oct. 3, 2020

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN,
FOR THEY WILL BE COMFORTED.**

— Matthew 5:4

UPCOMING EVENTS

Live nativity—Drive thru. Dec. 5, 4-7 P.M. Martin Luther, Oshkosh, Wis. Website, martinlutheroshkosh.com.

WELS ministerial education school Christmas concerts—

- Watch a pre-recorded Christmas concert from Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich., on Dec. 25. Livestream is at 1 P.M. EST. Website, mlsem.org/cardinalcasts.
- Dec. 13, 3 and 7 P.M. CST. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. Registration required. Livestream available online for 3 P.M. service. Website, wisluthsem.org.

Men of His Word conferences—Theme: “More than conquerors.” Website, menofhisword.org.

- Jan. 30, 2021. Desert Willow Conference Center, Phoenix, Ariz. menofhisword.az@gmail.com.
- Feb. 21, 2021. Best Western Convention Center, Oshkosh, Wis.
- Oct. 23, 2021. Mayo Civic Center, Rochester, Minn.

To place an announcement, call 414-256-3210 or e-mail ficsubmissions@wels.net. Deadline is eight weeks before publication date.

SEE MORE AT welsrc.net/bulletinboard.

THROUGH MY *Bible* IN 3 YEARS

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

DECEMBER 2020

READ MORE AT wels.net/bible3

From our records, this completes the three-year cycle of Bible readings. We pray that your Bible reading has been a blessing to you. Next month, we’re starting a new set of readings that will focus on God’s story of our salvation. Please join us as we trace God’s grace through the entire Bible.

THANKS!

Just read the October issue cover-to-cover. It is, by far, the best issue of FIC in the last 10 or 15 years. Love Dave Scharf’s timely reminders about the two kingdoms. Truly appreciated the balance between family (generational) evangelism [pp. 16,17] and compassionate vocation [pp. 18-21]. Richard Lauersdorf’s review of the book of James and good works fit perfectly with the overall theme, and Souksamay Phetsanghane’s article on Jesus’ parables paired with the follow up by Evan Chartrand on the kingdom were outstanding. (I am personally hoping we get to read a lot more about how ordinary people should approach reading the Bible.) Thanks for making FIC better than it already was.

*Kenn Kremer
Appleton, Wisconsin*

GOSPEL PARENTING

Re: “Parent conversations” [Oct., p. 16]. I’m a mother of four and now a grandmother. I look back at my parenting with guilt but am comforted by my forgiveness through Christ. But one of the things I most regret is the comparison parenting I engaged in all too often. My children reflected on me as a successful (or not) parent and then by extension my success as a person/Christian. I’ve matured. Somewhere along the line I realized so many, many things don’t matter in eternity! I wish I could have used that wisdom in my parenting! Pastor Schultz really hit the reality of how judgmental and unrealistic we tend to be regarding raising children. Our focus should always be their souls, rather than how their behavior makes us look!

*Charmaine Greanya
Muskego, Wisconsin*

JESUS RULES ALL THINGS

“Imperfect world, imperfect life” from John Braun [Aug., p. 32] hit home with me! I have been so down lately about things going on. I am having major eyesight problems that may cause blindness, we have COVID-19 which caused me to lose a job I loved (I am working again somewhere else), and the political climate is such as I have never seen in 50 years. Then there are the daily things like child or animal abuse, violence of all kinds, etc. It can be hard to deal with! But John Braun reminds us that imperfections are everywhere, even in our own selves. Yet when we were at our worst, Christ died for us! Jesus rules all things for the good of all believers! With all that is going on in the world, focus on Christ!

*Keleen Carlson
Madison, Tennessee*

See more feedback on the next page.

COMMUNITY

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YOUR OPINION

THE CHRISTIAN AND VOTING

We have received many responses—both positive and negative—from readers about Prof. Scharf's article, "Can a Christian vote for a political candidate who supports abortion?" [Oct., p. 14]. We have included only a few. We are grateful for both the criticism and the praise.

Thank you for this piece. I appreciate the emphasis on being guided in voting by how we can best love our neighbor. It's easy for Christians to get sucked into the typical US style of voting based on "Who's going to make life easier for me?"

Thank you also for demonstrating how to talk about a difficult topic in a loving way, one where we take our neighbors' words and actions "in the kindest possible way."

Stefanie Cox **FIC**

I'm glad you shared this. I have strong opinions and vote according to my conscience, sometimes with my nose plugged. Literally. But I love that I have other devout Christian friends who have equally strong opinions and who vote according to their conscience, whose votes are far different than mine, sometimes with their noses plugged. I have often pondered this at the Communion rail between people who vote very differently, but both because of their Christian beliefs. Kneeling with the same hope and the same prayer: Lord have mercy!

Melissa Pittenger **FIC**

Thank you for this article. I sincerely hope it resonates with others as much as it did for me. And I hope it helps facilitate difficult conversations.

Sarah Gerrish **FIC**

Thank you so much for Pastor David Scharf's well-written and theologically sound Q&A regarding Christians and politics. . . . Such an open, loving, and non-judgmental answer makes me proud of our synod and its leaders. Thank you!

Bettina Winfrey

Mothers murdering their children are the most heinous acts and greatly supersede all other topics on the table. It is a matter of destroying the very gift of life that God has created in you and possibly destroying that child's chance of salvation. All of the other topics Pastor Scharf mentioned are utterly frivolous in comparison.

Susan Waldhuetter **FIC**

Abortion is not godly or loving or Christian. Supporting abortion is not godly or loving or Christian. Excusing abortion is not godly or loving or Christian.

Matt Grunewald **FIC**

Thank you for your thoughtful, evangelical approach to a very, very difficult topic, Pastor Scharf! I pray that your voice of reason resonates on both sides of this subject.

Bill Pekrul **FIC**

We uphold the Fifth Commandment. You don't vote for murder.

Kristie Patterson **FIC**

People who consider voting for a pro-choice candidate should . . . be made aware of the fact that Planned Parenthood includes abortion in their definition of healthcare.

Ruth Kovaciny

Let us be active, compassionate, and shrewd members of the kingdom of the state, for the sake of millions of babies who desperately need protection, and for the millions of women and men who suffer in silence from past abortions. Let us be both productive and blameless in our anger over the government-sanctioned destruction of over 900,000 children each year in this country. Let us pray for God's wisdom and direction. Let us study his Word tirelessly, so that the Holy Spirit has opportunity to transform us from the inside out, renewing our sinful minds so that we have the mind of Christ.

As we assume our God-given responsibilities in the kingdom of the state, let us uphold the biblical principle of protecting life with all the strength, wisdom, and perseverance that Christ himself provides.

Mollie Schweppe

Executive Editor John A. Braun replies:

I asked Prof. Scharf to write on this topic because I thought it was important during an election year. As he explored the topic, Prof. Scharf clearly wrote, "Abortion is murder." That's God's truth, and neither FIC nor WELS has abandoned that truth. As Christians we should speak our minds about what God says about abortion, not only to each other but also to those who do not share our conviction.

But God has not revealed how we should vote. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we do not disagree about abortion, but we may disagree with how each other votes for a candidate. God gives us no command on that issue, and Prof. Scharf did not either. We listen to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and respect that each of us will think carefully and prayerfully over all decisions we must make in this imperfect world.

Send your letters to *Forward in Christ*, N16W23377 Stone Ridge Dr, Waukesha WI 53188; ficsubmissions@wels.net. Letters are edited for clarity, conciseness, and relevance. Writers' views are not necessarily those of WELS or *Forward in Christ*.

FIC = comment made online at forwardinchrist.net.

Come let us adore him

Whether you're continuing old Christmas traditions or starting new ones this year, one thing that will never change is the truth of Jesus' birth. Celebrate the joy of God's salvation plan this Christmas and beyond with books, gifts, and more from Northwestern Publishing House.

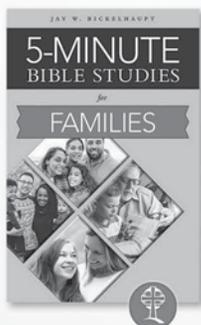
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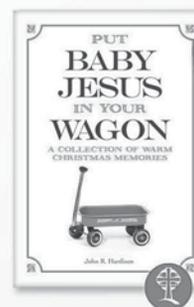


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The lights, the flames, and the bright Christmas displays are only dim reminders of the great glory of Christmas. | Gary P. Baumler

CHRISTMAS

glory



PHOTO | Lightstock

CHRISTMAS IS A TIME of glory. Consider the glory the apostle John speaks of in John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

GOD’S GLORY AT CHRISTMAS

We find this glory in a stable in Bethlehem, where no bright lights burned and few would even have noticed, except that God sent angels to announce the event to some lowly shepherds. In that stable, a young peasant woman gave birth to a son and placed him in a feeding trough for his crib. Not much glory in that—at least not on the surface. Remember, the mother was a virgin. And the child? He who was in the beginning, the Word in the beginning, became a child in time. He who was God became flesh. He who was with God came to be with us. Our God, who has appeared in a burning bush, as a pillar of fire, as a consuming fire on Mount Sinai—whose glory filled the tabernacle and the temple, whose glory lights all of heaven—packaged all that glory and sent it to us in the person of his Son.

Why? He did it because there was no other way that we could stand

before him in all his glory. We were standing—better said, wallowing—in the dark, murky depths of sin. To be confronted with God’s unveiled glory would have destroyed us.

So, instead, God sent his Son to save us—such great love he had for the people he created but who rebelled against him.

Know the truth—the truth that the child in the stable came to bring you eternal life.

He reached out to us through his Son because he loved us. It’s unimaginable that the God of glory could love us, who by nature are the children of darkness. But he did, and he gave us his Son. That’s grace! And the radiance of that grace shows us his glory.

GOD’S GLORY BEYOND THE STABLE

We must go beyond the stable to see it more clearly. A visible manifestation of his glory was Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain before Peter, James, and John. But go beyond that—to the cross and to the empty grave. See him take our sins in his body and give us his righteousness. See him die in our

place. See him rise victorious—this babe of Bethlehem. See him ascend again to heaven’s throne with the promise to come again. That’s grace. That’s God’s glory.

Now look beyond—further into the future. Know the truth—the truth that the child in the stable came to bring you eternal life. Treasure the truth that makes you a disciple of the Savior, Jesus. Guard and keep it. See the glory in it and look for him to come again in power and great glory. Look forward to the indescribable glory of his heaven.

You have seen the glory of God in Christ, haven’t you? That glory dwells with you today. It’s not in the fire that burns on the ends of candles. That fire will eventually go out. It’s the eternal fire that burns in the hearts of believers—in your heart and mine. It’s the light that shines the way to heaven. It’s the flame of faith that compels you to go, like the shepherds, and tell others what you have seen.

It is the light of Jesus Christ.



Gary Baumler, a retired pastor, is a member at Living Savior, Asheville, North Carolina.