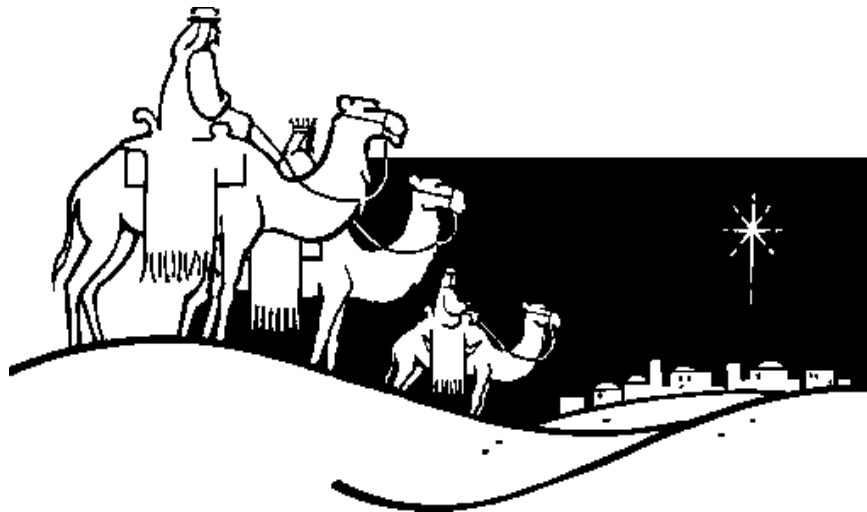


# *2009 Advent Devotional*

*Our Savior's Lutheran Church  
Menomonie, WI*

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*He Brings  
All Hearts Together!*



*The Evangelism Committee gladly presents this devotional booklet to you. This collection of daily devotions has been written by members of our congregation for daily use by our congregation during the season of Advent. Peace be with you.*

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## He Brings All Hearts Together

Advent marks the first season in the Christian calendar (so, Happy New Year!!). It is a season of hope and anticipation as we await the arrival of our Lord and Savior in the form of a baby in a manger.

The theme for this Advent devotional comes from an advent hymn in our cranberry hymnals. You will be enlightened by the insights of your fellow OSL members as they share about memories, experiences and passions which fit into this theme of bringing all hearts together. We are a Hand in Hand congregation which means that we are committed to the Four Keys in faith formation, one of which is engaging in devotions. There is a devotion here for every day in December up through Christmas day. Please take the time to read a devotion every day, pray the prayer and then add your own prayer petitions as you and your family awaits the coming of Christmas. This is often a very busy season with Holiday parties, concerts, shopping and traveling. Let us all be sure and take the time to quietly devote our hearts and minds to stay focused on the “reason for the season”. Blessings to you all this blessed Advent Season!

*Awake! Awake, and greet the new morn,  
for angels herald its dawning.  
Sing out your joy, for soon he is born,  
behold! the Child of our longing.  
Come as a baby weak and poor,  
to bring all hearts together,  
he opens wide the heav'nly door  
and lives now inside us forever.*

Evangelical Worship Book hymn #242

**Tuesday, December 1, 2009**

**Romans 8: 28 We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.**

The Advent Theme this season is "He Brings All Hearts Together." God certainly has played a leading part in this theme throughout my life. When I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, our family moved to Menomonie and joined Our Savior's. One summer night after a Ludington Guard Band Concert, Mike Schendel walked me home....and God "brought our hearts together." After high school and college, we were married at Our Savior's and are now planning to celebrate our 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in June 2010.

God has been in control of our lives during many moves around the Midwest and also in returning to Menomonie and Our Savior's in retirement.

*Gracious Lord, We thank you for being in control of our lives and for the many blessings we have received from you. Amen.*

Sally Schendel

**Wednesday, December 2, 2009**

**Matthew 11: 28-30 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."**

Being a mathematician, much of my life deals with balance, like performing the same operation on both sides of an equation. While keeping balance in my calculations is fairly straightforward, achieving balance in my life is very difficult. I often feel like I don't have enough time for my children, my husband, or even day-to-day chores. Finding time for myself is still more of a challenge, as I'm sure most

moms know.

During the Advent season, it's especially easy to get caught up in all the holiday preparations, gift buying, and commercialism of the world around us. I find myself even busier meeting with students and grading final exams as the end of the fall semester approaches. If I keep my focus on Jesus, though, preparing for Christmas isn't a burden, but a joy. Reading devotions like these each night, worshipping and reflecting on Sunday mornings and evenings, and spending quality time with family helps me refocus on the meaning of the season and the purpose of my life. I know I'll never achieve the perfect balance in my life, but when I take time to "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Psalm 46:10), turn to God with my daily burdens, and thank God for all of the wonderful blessings in my life, I do find rest for my soul.

*God, during this Advent season, help us keep our focus on the blessings you give us every day. When we feel burdened, help us take time to rest and renew our energy as we prepare to celebrate your ultimate blessing, Jesus. Amen.*

Joy Becker

### **Thursday, December 3, 2009**

**Micah 6:6-8 "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**

One of the beloved traditions surrounding the Christmas

season is the giving of gifts to loved ones. It's our way of reflecting the love we have received through God's greatest gift to us, our salvation as it has come to us in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christmas signals the greatest gift any of us could ever receive, and it came to us in an unsuspecting little bundle of joy on the first Christmas.

Deciding what to give someone can be a challenge. "What shall I give them?" A new giving tradition is taking root in the hearts and minds of many. That tradition is Christmas Alternative Giving. Instead of giving more things to people who already want for nothing, we can give them a gift that makes a difference globally.

For the third year in a row the Missions Committee will be offering Bed Nets as Christmas Gifts. For people in malaria infested countries like Malawi, a bed net is their best defense against contracting this life threatening, mosquito borne disease. For \$7.00 you can "purchase" a bed net. The bed net will be put to use overseas, and you will receive a beautiful note card to put under the Christmas tree for that person you love.

*Heavenly Father, you have given us the greatest gift ever in the gift of your Son. May our giving to one another reflect a small particle of his pure light. Amen.*

Mary Jorgensen

**Friday, December 4, 2009**

**Luke 2:12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."**

It was the early 90's, I was sitting in a hotel room in Dar es Salaam with my boss, Rev. Joseph Bocko. We were waiting to meet with some church folk and I had a Lutheran Woman Today that I was reading. In the magazine was a meditation that I asked Pastor Bocko to do. You were to close your eyes and to imagine yourself in the manger. It was a lot more complicated than that and took about 15 minutes to slowly read through. Afterwards there were some questions to reflect on your experience. I will always remember his response. He talked about the smell of the manger. Having grown up in the village with farm animals, he knew all too well what the smell of that barn would have been. After having experienced Christmas pageants here in the States where the 3 and 4 year olds dress up like sheep (and adorable they are too!), or our crèches come with "toy" animals, we end up sanitizing over the fact that the manger was really a stinky, filthy barn where the animals slept and ...well...did their thing! Rev. Bocko was struck by the Christ child being born into that stench. We then both talked about the fact that Jesus has never shied away from being there in the midst of the stench that creeps into our lives. Jesus is worthy to be worshipped and praised by the stinky Shepherds as well as the perfumed Wise Men. Oh, come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

*Faithful Lord, we are so grateful that you come to us where we are, in the midst of our messes, and you love us through our joys and sorrows. Help us to keep our eyes focused on you during this busy season. Help us to take the time to meditate on the greatness that is this birth story of our Savior and Lord! Amen.*

Barbara Solsaa

**Saturday, December 5, 2009**

**Luke 10:38-42** As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Can you see the clenched jaw? The wrinkle in her brow? Her dark eyes flashing? Martha is upset! Feelings can really twist us into unrecognizable creatures. I like to think that Martha is a caring and nice person, usually. Feelings make us do and say things that are not kind and hurtful. Certainly she doesn't want Mary to be having fun with the group while she is working, and she wants Jesus to make her sister get up and work.

Jesus acknowledges that she has her feelings hurt. He then gives her a little instruction about who has chosen wisely about her priorities. Her eyes maybe go wide. She debates storming out of the room, crying - or - releasing her anger and sitting in His presence. We don't know any more about this. What would you do?

I would like to think that she got her priorities straight when she looked into the Savior's face. Her heart became right. She put the kingdom of heaven first and everything

else fell into place...not as she wants but as God wants.  
Can you see her sitting with Jesus and the other disciples?  
Hearts united in His love, maybe next to Mary.

*Lord, help us to be less concerned about our own lives and be more concerned about our lives together. Help us have joy in being together, joining our hearts as one, in you. Amen.*

Doug Hyde

### **Sunday, December 6, 2009**

**John 1:5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.**

When I think of Advent, I always think of candles. When I was growing up, not only did we light the Advent Candles in our home, but we also had a special advent candle with the numbers 24 down to 1 that we burned down every night up to Christmas Eve. Our church lit the advent candles and even the banners in church displayed an extra candle every week as we progressed through Advent. I have always been drawn to candles and love the atmosphere that candles evoke. The only time that candles lost their "romantic" quality was when I was living in Tanzania and there were times when I would go an entire month without electricity. My large world, past 7 PM, would shrink to the circumference of light that my little array of candles and lanterns shed. I wanted my large, safe, shadowless world back and was delighted when TANESCO got their diesel supply and I got my electricity back. But did I have it wrong? Was it perhaps not better to have my world shrink, to have the light shine only on the here and now, on this one space? It reminded me of a quote that I use often from a book by Gerhard Frost called *The Color of the Night*. Gerhard writes, "God knows that the road we must travel would overwhelm us if we could, in a single moment, see around

every bend. He gives us a candle rather than a floodlight – and he promises to be there. He asks us to remember that mystery is one form of his mercy. His aim is not to keep things from us, but to keep things – the best things – for us!” I am grateful that God leads me with a candle, rather than a floodlight, showing me just enough so that I can handle it, knowing that He will be with me, supporting me, loving me, regardless of what shows up around the next corner, no matter what is currently being shown in the light of the candle.

*God, thank you for the amazing gift that we are anticipating this season, the gift of your Son, the light of the world – a light that shines in the darkness, the light which darkness will NEVER overcome. Thank you for the light that you bring into the dark places of my life. Thank you for leading me with a candle instead of a spotlight to keep me from feeling overwhelmed. Thank you my sweet, comforting God. Amen.*

Barbara Solsaa

### **Monday, December 7, 2009**

**Isaiah 40:5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.**

Then. When the word “then” is used as an adverb it can mean “at that time,” “next,” or “after that”. Here in this passage from Isaiah it’s a future word; a word for tomorrow. It’s a word that takes us beyond today into a time that has yet to be. It’s a word we use when we want to look beyond the horizon of the current moment. It can be a troubling word if it signifies an unknown future. But not here! In this passage it signals the culmination of history into the glorious revelation of the LORD. For time itself has a LORD. People cannot recapture the past even though we lived through it, and we cannot preserve the present though we live in it now, and we cannot throw ourselves

into the future though it is but a breath away. We exist in time but time exists in God. Advent is all about time. It is about the future when the LORD Jesus will come again. For Isaiah as for us who wait during Advent, "then" is a word filled with hope, expectation, and eagerness. "Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed..."

*Lord Jesus, come to your people in faith and hope. Come to your children in mercy and grace. Come now and give us the promise of your future in bright awakenings. Then we will see your glory even as we have believed it today. Amen.*

Roy Harrisville

**Tuesday, December 8, 2009**

**2 Corinthians 9: 7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.**

A woman came into the food pantry the last time we were there. She was happy to be at the pantry. She brought in a box of food; extra things that she knew she wouldn't or couldn't use. She asked a few questions, what does the food pantry need, or what things don't they want, is there somewhere to give other things? I took her on a short tour of the pantry and she was surprised by the changes. She said she used to come to the food pantry. I asked her if she had been a volunteer and she said, "No, we needed the food pantry to get by." They needed the pantry about 20 years ago when her children were young and she was so thankful that the pantry was there. Now she is thankful to be able to return some of the gifts she was given. She is truly a cheerful giver.

*Heavenly Father, Thank you for the service of the coordinators of the Interfaith Volunteers. They provide so much help and support to those in need in our community. Be with them as each*

*Continued on next page*

*day. Let us be strong supporters and cheerful givers. In Jesus name we pray. Amen*

Helen Redlich

### **Wednesday, December 9, 2009**

**Luke 2:10-12 But the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid! I bring you the most joyful news ever announced, and it is for everyone! The Savior - yes, the Messiah, the Lord - has been born tonight in Bethlehem!"**

Over the centuries there have been musicians composing countless songs of adoration and psalms of glory; artists painting innumerable pictures filled with devotion and affection; theologians, authors and ordinary people writing millions of words in thousands of tongues, each one striving to express one simple truth:

God is Love,  
And He sent the Baby to tell us.

*Dear Lord God, during this Advent season, this season of love, may we be ever mindful that your love is for all of your children, and help us to willingly share the many blessings you have given us. Amen.*

Nancy Bjornson

### **Thursday, December 10, 2009**

**2 Corinthians 9:10-11 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.**

These words jumped out at me when I read them because of some thoughts that I had been having of late about friendship, the words of a song and an email. (I find it fascinating how God will over a period of time put the build-

ing blocks of an idea in our heads and then engineers a way for us to put them together. I used to think it was luck, now I know it is God, but I digress)

I have for a number of years now come to define friends as people I choose to have as family. We all are more generous with our time and possessions with family than others. Shouldn't we also with friends? That isn't too much of a stretch. But Paul is asking us to be generous with all we meet and in all occasions.

An email today told the story of a gentleman flying across Canada on a plane with some soldiers headed for Afghanistan. He learned they could not afford the lunch on the plane so he quietly bought lunches for them. His generosity opened other hearts to contribute as well. The soldiers had their lunches paid for and money for other meals.

The story is the type of generosity we envision being a part of. What about being generous even if the person receiving the generosity does not understand or is even suspect of it? That is a tall order.

Nicole Nordeman in her song "I am Small" states that just the mention of God's name and she is "ready to risk it all, even ready to fall". How many of us are willing to risk being generous to the point of a fall? I would, have and will struggle with that, except for the fact that I now understand that I am not being generous for me, but for God. *"Your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."*

*Lord thank you for the many opportunities everyday to share your love that you give us. Help to be generous to those in need of spiritual or physical needs. Open our hearts and grant us the insight and wisdom to your will.*

Mike Cooper

**Friday, December 11, 2009**

**1 Corinthians 12:4: There are different kinds of gifts but the same spirit.**

Have you ever really thought of the gifts you have received in the past? Some you needed, some you just wanted. In Jason F. Wright's book "*The Christmas Jar*", what began as a gift between newlyweds blossomed into a gift that touched many people and even came back to the original couple in a time of need. Isn't that what God's gift of Jesus has done for us? What started out as a small baby in a manger has blossomed into a celebration of life and giving to others. Our gifts could never come close to what God has given us but just think of what just a smile and a greeting could do to a person who is alone, or just a little money could do to feed a family in need.

*Dear Lord, Thank you for your gift of Jesus. Help us to keep your gift in our heart and to spread this gift to everyone we meet.*

*Amen*

May you have a Very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Arvin Solsaa

**Saturday, December 12, 2009**

**Genesis 1: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and 31.**

The above seven verses all have the words 'it was good or it was very good.' The references as to what was good includes: light, land & water, trees & bushes, day and night, all the sea creatures, all the land creatures; and that made everything very good. In considering what to write in this advent devotional I remembered back when I was studying to become a Bethel Bible teacher. I drove home from Madison one day with a cassette in the radio playing Genesis. Those words IT WAS GOOD impressed me so much I've never forgotten them. Here is how I'm bringing that to this

2009 Advent devotional: it seems everything has been going so good that I can say 'it is good.' First, and foremost, was my finding a new life with my new wife Lois; and it is very good. Beyond that, most recently was the absolutely beautiful fall we've had. The colors were just magnificently vivid. We drove around and thrilled to the bright reds, the brilliant yellows, the glorious rusts all combined with the evergreens. It won't be long and that beautiful white snow will also create a feeling of 'it is good.' The world the Lord has made for us is indeed GOOD.

*Dear Lord, thank you for making the world such a beautiful place for us to live. Grant us the wisdom and strength to keep it a Good World. Amen.*

Jack Sampson

### **Sunday, December 13, 2009**

**John 9:25 "I was blind but now I see."**

A little boy was sitting in church with his family when he whispered to his mother, "I need my Jesus glasses." She wondered how he came up with such a title and responded, "Jesus glasses?"

After putting them on he said, "Yeah, I can see Jesus now." In front of the church was a mural of Jesus as shepherd around a flock of sheep. Wearing his glasses allowed him to see Jesus more clearly and distinctly. The boy's contentment showed in his smile.

Sometimes our vision of Jesus is blurred, out of focus, and not as clear as it could be. We let so many things get in the way of our Christian perspective. This Christmas and well into the next year you are invited to observe God's glory in all you do, as you keep your "Jesus glasses" on.

*Dear Lord, help us to experience even greater clarity in how you want us to see you and others according to your will. Help us to be reflections of you in all that we say and do. Amen.*

Steve Siegle

**Monday, December 14, 2009**

**1 Thessalonians 5:17 "Pray without ceasing."**

I remember being at a meeting with some fine OSL members early in my ministry here. We were talking about getting the Cherish Our Children program going, and recruiting adults at OSL to pray for youth and children. We are blessed with a large number of members, and so, at first we did not know where to start. Someone suggested that we begin by praying for the youth in confirmation. I hesitated, because I thought that recruiting 60 or more adults to pray was a formidable task...and I did not want to start out struggling. As God often does when we forget how powerful He is, God moved in the hearts of so many people, that from the beginning we had more prayer partners volunteer than we had youth to pray for. God, in short order, reminded me that He is in control, and no one, particularly me, should underestimate Him. It's been almost five years now. As of today, there are more than 175 members of Our Savior's praying for 309 students. The students range in age from 2nd grade -20 years. Because three of my own kids are in this bunch, I can say that it is a great comfort to have caring people from OSL praying for my children! And to all who are praying, I ask that you follow the verse in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Pray continually for these kids, and for all kids. Pray for their safety, and pray that they will always know the love of Christ.

*Lord, thank you for always being more than we could ever imagine. Amen.*

Kristin Hildebrand

**Tuesday, December 15, 2009**

**Matthew 28:20b "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."**

At the end of Matthew Jesus gives us the great commission and tells us that he will always be with us. Unfortunately, we all too often lose sight of that fact, in times of trouble as well as in times of plenty. He reminded us of his presence this past summer while riding my bike on a country road east of Menomonie.

Just over 20 years ago I blew out my ACL downhill skiing in Oregon. During my rehab, I was introduced to cycling as a low-impact way to strengthen my surgically repaired knee. I took to it immediately, bought a decent bike (aka my trusty steed), and started laying down the miles, in Oregon and when I moved back to Wisconsin. The summer before Carl was born, I rode over 2400 miles, almost all of them by myself.

With the arrival of our 3 children, I gave the roads around Menomonie a rest and stabled my trusty steed. But after a 10-year hiatus, Nancy and the kids had my bike tuned up, encouraged me to get out there, and I was on the road again. Now, by this time, Randy Eide had moved to Oakpark Circle and I had a neighbor and a partner who enjoyed riding even more than I do. And 2 summers ago, our enthusiasm for riding attracted another neighbor, Mark Vinnall, to try cycling with us. By next summer he may be leaving both of us in his wake.

With our busy professional and personal lives, it can be difficult for us to find time to ride together. But with the long, warm days of summer we try and get our 30 miles in before work, while wives and children sleep and before work demands our time and attention. One of our favorite rides takes us out east of Menomonie, through Rusk, out to Tainter Lake, past Jake's, and back into town via Cedar Falls and the Twin Springs Campground. One morning I

happened to be on this route alone and as I turned west, back towards home, with the sun now just rising behind me, a halo of light surrounded my shadow as it skimmed over the hay fields lining the road. I suspect that "halo" was simply light from the sunrise reflecting just right off my helmet, but for me, in that moment, it was a heavenly reminder that we are blessed by God and that Jesus is always with us.

The next time I had Randy and Mark with me on that route and we turned west towards home, as the sun rose behind us, I said, "Hey, look at my halo." Due to the nature of this "optical illusion", they couldn't see mine, but they each had their own. We were all reminded that Jesus is always with us, in times of trouble, in times of plenty, and on a country road east of Menomonie heading west at sunrise with good friends by your side.

*Dear Lord thank you for always being with us and reminding us of your ever presence. Amen*

Jeff Ohvall

### **Wednesday, December 16, 2009**

**Matthew 17: 20-21 ... "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."**

Do you ever stop and think back to the story of the Israelites Exodus from Egypt? How time after time God did amazing things to make them safe and feel God's presence during their journey. Think about it for a while . . . the people of God trapped by Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea, and God parting the waters to give them a path to escape as well as crashing the sea upon the army once the Israelites have crossed...God providing the manna and quail in the desert when the Israelites are hungry...God providing wa-

ter from a stone when the Israelites are thirsty...The Israelites defeating the Amalekites. And what happens after all these amazing events, dare we say miracles? The people of God lose faith in God and turn their worship to a Golden Calf. Unbelievable isn't it!

It's almost too much to comprehend these are the people who were present and experiencing firsthand the power and love of God. How could they lose faith so quickly? Today are we continually looking for God to knock us over the head with another miracle? Perhaps God has learned from these huge events that people return to their sinful ways. Perhaps we need to dig a little deeper to discover and realize the miracles given to us. Let our faith even at its smallest most tried moments develop deep roots and grow.

Often I feel as though I am looking for a clear sign from God helping me feel God's presence, and clearly see the direction I need to go and decision I need to make. I want an easy choice where any other choice seems impossible. With God, we must remember that all things are possible and often only whispers from God are present. We need to slow down be quiet and listen for those whispers which guide our journey.

The Jewish people regarded the exodus event as an everlasting sign that God chose them and loved them. As Christians, we regard Jesus' suffering and death on the cross in the same way. During our Advent journey we again contemplate this historical event through which God saved us. Regardless of where our life leads, we can count on God's unfailing love in Jesus to sustain us.

*Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus, to reach out and touch him, to say that we love him. Open our ears, Lord, teach us to listen. Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see you Lord. Amen.*

Audric Buhr

**Thursday, December 17, 2009**

**Hebrews 11:1-3 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith\* our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.**

At the foundation of our Christian faith are the many things our Creator promises us: salvation, forgiveness, mercy and unconditional love. While these things cannot always be seen, we often discover that what keeps our faith lives strong are *mere glimpses* of them through our relationships with one another.

Back in January of 2003, I felt the Holy Spirit call me to begin the journey that would lead me towards becoming a Lutheran pastor. I was shocked by this revelation because it seemed to come from nowhere. I admit that in the years that followed there have been moments (and months) where doubt punctuated my seminary studies and clouded my vision of where I was going. But our loving Lord did not allow me to linger too long in these thoughts of uncertainty. The assurance that I was on the right path was strengthened by the encouraging words of members at Our Savior's and at my internship congregation in Eau Claire. The financial support from both congregations also encouraged me and helped me to know that fellow Lutherans valued my future ministry enough to help with schooling expenses.

What a blessing it is to know that as baptized members of God's family and Church we all share the promise of God's unconditional love, mercy, forgiveness, and salvation. We are united with all Christians throughout the world through the faith we have in those things which we cannot always see. Each day that we are in this world created by the Word of God, we have the opportunity to encourage

one another through our words and actions; and we can share the message of the hope of salvation to all we meet. Not everyone receives a call to pastoral ministry, but **we all have a calling in life**...something that God has gifted us to do well. What is your calling? How are you stepping out in faith to use these gifts to the glory of God? If you are uncertain of where God is leading in your life, take time in your day to strengthen your Christian walk in life through Bible reading and spending time in prayer. Remember too, that part of our conversation with God requires that we be still and listen for God's words to us.

*Almighty Creator, Savior and Spirit, Thank you for the life and faith you gave us at our baptism. Strengthen us and give us courage to faithfully live out your love to the world around us. We have been blessed by your love and seek to glorify you in what we say and do. Amen.*

Mary Eide

### **Friday, December 18, 2009**

**Matthew 2:11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, incense and myrrh.**

I don't know if the Magi started the gift giving at Christmas, but today it unfortunately is a major part of celebrating the birth of the Christ Child. Many shops and stores depend on our Christmas shopping if they are to end up in the black for the year.

I must admit I'm not too excited about giving/receiving gifts at Christmas, maybe because I am just a tight old German, but I like to think it is because we should be more concerned about how we can help the truly needy of this world instead of fretting about what gift to buy for that person who already has everything.

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So, in recent years I have been giving gifts to people I do not and probably never will know, in the name of my family. This includes bed nets for malaria infested regions, and animals to families for income and food. For people I do know, fair-traded coffee and chocolate from the display in the office make useful gifts, and give the growers a better price for their labors.

This year I may try something a little different. I hope to buy a large animal such as a water buffalo for a family in Asia and then find a picture puzzle of that animal and give a few pieces to each family member so they must put it together to determine their collective gift. (nobody tell, please)

ELCA Good Gifts, Heifer International, and Serrv International are good sources for these gifts. Also, our church will probably be selling bed nets again this year.

My wish for you is a Christmas blessed by the Christ Child and Joyous Gifting.

*Jesus, as we once again celebrate your birth, help us to never forget those who have not nearly enough, as we remember those who have more than enough.*

Don Kuether

### **Saturday, December 19, 2009**

**Luke 2:6-7 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**

Imagine living life and trusting in God, knowing God would take care of you, knowing that whatever he gave you was enough. In the time that Mary and Joseph lived, things weren't easy. Can you imagine transporting an extremely pregnant woman on a difficult, several-day, 80-mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem on the back of a donkey? And then, the Best Western, the Hyatt, the Super 8,

and even the family-run inn don't have a single bed for this tired, sore woman to rest. It must have been a miserable feeling for Joseph to not be able to provide a comfortable place for his wife to take a load off. But not nearly as miserable as it was for Mary!

So they do the best they can as they take up shelter in a stable. At least there was probably a little straw so that Mary could bed down like one of the smelly animals around her. It's no wonder Mary went into labor in the stable, considering the long journey, the smell and the stress of carrying a holy child. To add insult to injury, this precious infant comes into the world and has no place to sleep, either. So his parents place him in a cattle trough.

The story sounds like one straight from a made-for-TV movie. The conditions sound absolutely intolerable by today's standards. But God had given Mary, Joseph and Jesus everything they needed.

So it is in our lives. When we believe there is a way things should or have to be, that is inevitably when things don't happen that way. We are easily discouraged because our expectations are so high. It's easy to be discouraged in these tough times in our country. But look around you. For a moment, ignore all of the sadness, pain, stress and struggles. Take a couple of minutes (or more, if you need) to think about all of the things in your life you can be thankful for and then continue reading. Go ahead, close your eyes and think.

It's obvious that God has given you more gifts than we can even count and he continues to provide. And he'll keep providing for you.

*Thank you, Lord, for all you given us, for all of our blessings, for all of our gifts. We find it easy to focus on the relatively few things that we struggle with and difficult to focus on the abundance you've given us. Help us to be thankful for all we've been given and to realize that all we have is more than enough. Amen.*

Joel Becker

**Sunday, December 20, 2009**

**Luke 2:16-18** So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

*"Tradition, tradition, tradition!" - Tevye from Fiddler on the Roof.*

WARNING: DO NOT READ TO SMALL CHILDREN!

Today is my FAVORITE day of the whole year. No, it is not my birthday, but it is the day that our immediate family celebrates Christmas. It always falls on the Sunday before we travel either to Chicago or South Dakota for the holidays. We attend worship, come home and eat a feast on our fine china (the only day that it comes out). We then move to the living room where we tell the Christmas story using the parts of the crèche, we read the Christmas story out of the Bible and then we read a delightful book entitled: *Mama, was Santa born on Christmas, too?* Not wanting to "lie" to our adopted children, we used this book to explain the reality and the legends about the real St. Nicholas and then it goes on to explain how St. Nick transformed to being our jolly Santa Claus. It includes Santa stories from other countries but most importantly, it concludes with the true meaning and gift of Christmas which is the Christ child. Next, we go through the green and blue hymnals and sing every Christmas carol to our hearts content. The singing alone takes upwards of an hour. Finally, in the spirit of God giving us the gift of Christ, we give each other our Christmas gifts taking time to open the presents in turns and to take time to ooh and ah over every one. Inevitably, someone has received a DVD for Christmas and so we finally retreat to our family room and watch a movie together. So now you know what our family is doing today!

*Savior, thank you for the blessing of traditions that bring us closer to each other and to you! You are indeed the reason for the season!*

Barbara Solsaa

### **Monday, December 21, 2009**

**John 20:24-29** Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Not everyone is happy and cheery around the Christmas holidays. Dealing with the death of a loved one, facing life after divorce or separation, coping with the loss of a job, living with cancer or some other dis-ease that puts a question mark over the future, and a number of other human situations make parties and joviality painful for many people in our congregations and communities. There is a growing attentiveness to the needs of people who are frankly downright sad at Christmas. Increasing numbers of churches are creating sacred space for people living through dark times. Such services are reflective, accepting where we really are, and holding out healing and hope. I have been a part of several LONGEST NIGHT worship

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services which most often take place on the longest night of the year, which falls on or about December 21st, the Winter Solstice. There is an interesting convergence for this day as it is also the traditional feast day for Thomas the Apostle. This linkage invites making some connections between Thomas's struggle to believe the story of Jesus' resurrection, the long nights just before Christmas, and the struggle with darkness and grief faced by those living with loss. May our eyes be open to those for whom this season is a poignant reminder of what they have lost this year. May we be moved to reach out to those people to allow them to acknowledge their grief in what should be the "happiest" time of the year.

*Dearest Lord Comforter, may those who are hurting this holiday season feel the balm of your love and comfort. Please touch our hearts to reach out to those who are hurting so that they may see in us, your loving concern for them. Amen.*

Barbara Solsaa

## **Tuesday, December 22, 2009**

**Luke 2:7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.**

Martin Luther had some great insight on this verse and what it might mean for us today even though he was writing it for people 500 years ago! He said, "There are some of us... who think to ourselves, 'If I had only been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby. I would have washed His linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!' Yes, we would. We say that because we know how great Christ is, but if we had been there at that time, we would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem... Why don't we do it now? We have Christ in our neighbor."

These words are true today. Mother Teresa spoke of how when she looked into the faces of those people whom she was serving, she always saw the face of Christ. We don't know how we would have reacted had we been there 2000+ years ago, but we do have an opportunity to serve Christ in so many ways every day as we look around to the needs of our neighbors. Christ is indeed in our neighbor, Christ is in *Christmas*, may we take time this Advent season to serve the Christ in our midst!

*Dearest Lord Jesus, help us to see YOU in our neighbor and to serve them as we would have wanted to serve you in our midst! Bless us to be a blessing!*

Barbara Solsaa

### **Wednesday, December 23, 2009**

**1 Corinthians 13:11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.**

I have lived a wonderful life in this world and still believe that my childhood years on a farm in Iowa were some of the best. Carefree, though hardworking; simple, yet fun. Then Dale and I had two sons and we truly enjoyed their younger years. We knew what ours had been like and wanted them to have some great memories of their childhood like we had. And now we get to watch the four grandsons as they grow up and also be a part of their childhood years.

My early childhood memories of the Christmas Season are still so vivid in my mind. It was a time of real joy as we counted down the "long" days before it arrived. And it really wasn't that long as we only started to prepare for it at the beginning of Advent. My mother would send out the Christmas cards, do the shopping and spent a lot of time in the kitchen baking and making candy on the woodstove.

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My sister, brother and I would help as much as my mother would let us.

I remember so well the Christmas Program at the Little Sioux Lutheran Church in the country. We recited our pieces, sang Christmas Carols and enacted the Manger Scene. Our proud parents were all watching as we performed on the "stage." We were all excited as we received our bag of candy, an apple and an orange at the end of the Pageant!

On a cold, snowy Christmas Eve we would go to my Grandma's house and get together with all of my aunts, uncles and cousins. My Grandma would ask all the grandchildren to recite the piece from our Sunday School Program and then we could open our gifts.

On our drive home I would wipe the moisture off of the back seat window and imagine that I saw Santa Claus soaring across the sky! Of course, waking up on Christmas morning he had always been there.

To wish my sons and grandsons their own happy memories is my hope. The times and customs have changed since I was a child but we all as Christians still look forward to celebrate the birth of Jesus. It is a Blessing from God that we can make this day a festive, magical Merry, Christmas!

*Dear God, thank you for our memories and help us to make memories for our children and grandchildren in hopes of keeping you at the front and center of this holiday season. Amen.*

Carol Seppa

**Thursday, December 24, 2009**

**"From heav'n above to earth I come  
To bear good news to ev'ry home!  
Glad tidings of great joy I bring  
Whereof I now will say and sing."**

The words of the above Christmas hymn (from the German

"Vom Himmel Hoch Da Komm Ich Her") were written by Martin Luther in 1531 and dedicated to his 5 year-old son Hans. A tradition for the Luther family was an annual Christmas Eve festival in their home. A man dressed as an angel would sing the opening verses of this hymn as he descended the staircase. Then the children and the rest of the household (including students) would continue with singing more verses.

This past June I was privileged to visit Wittenberg, Germany including the place in their home where the Luther family gathering likely would have occurred. The details of Luther's life including struggles and joys came alive as we wandered through the rooms of this home, the town, the streets and the churches where he preached.

It is said that Luther had a childlike appreciation for Christmas and this simple hymn "From Heav'n Above to Earth I Come" written for his children reveals this. Luther said, "Christ must above all things become our own and we become his." To me he is saying that Christ came for each of us in a personal way...and that we are invited each Christmas to bring him into OUR hearts again. From Luke 2:10 "for there is born to YOU this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Verse 12 of the hymn brings home Luther's emphasis on this personal connection...

"Ah dearest Jesus, holy child  
Prepare a bed, soft undefiled.  
A quiet chamber in my heart  
That you and I may never part."

*May this Advent be a time of preparing and receiving Christ once again into OUR hearts. Let us connect with this Child...like a child. Amen.*

Becky Kneer

**Friday, December 25, 2009**

**1 Chronicles 16:34 "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever."**

We entered the Walmart store and the usual gray-haired, blue-vested lady that dons a continuous smile was there again. She sang, "Welcome to Walmart!" As her eyes dropped to our son McKinley's who was age three at the time, she responded, "Would you like a happy sticker little fella?" McKinley nodded and accepted the free gift, strategically placing it on his coat with a smile. Then the phrase came, the question that parents have probably been asking for hundreds of years, "What do you say?" Silence. Again the encouraging question from us, "What do you say, McKinley?" As a youngster who was still learning phonetics, especially his "t"s, he said, "Sank you."

I think now is a good time to say "thank you" if we haven't already. We are coming to the close of another year and the Christmas Season, a time when it is especially good to reflect on what God has given us. We sometimes forget to say "thank you" and go about our days with that common silence. This Christmas, be sure to listen for the voice. It's there - it's always there. It is saying, "What do you say?"

*Lord, please be patient with our silence. Even in our quietness we are still thankful for everything you have done, are doing and continue to do in our lives. We thank you, Lord, and sing your praise. Amen.*

Merry Christmas and "Sank you!"

Steve Siegle

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