

Faith & Fellowship

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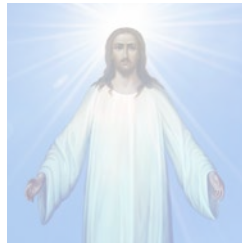
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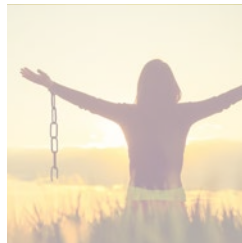
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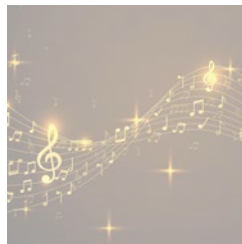
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Quiet Moments

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A Song of Praise

H.E. WISLØFF



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The gospel has a three-tone chord. The first tone is Evangelical. The gospel reminds us that we are lost sinners, otherwise Jesus would not have had to come. To save the lost was Christ’s mission. He came to die in our stead. Therefore, the shadow of the cross rests over the manger.

Where the gospel has been permitted to create real Christmas, we hear also the second tone, songs of praise to God, “Glory to God in the highest.” The gospel of the Christ who came that night creates peace when it is received by faith. The pleasure of God rests over believers for Christ’s sake. Before this, the wrath of God rested over us because of the guilt of our sin.

But there is a third tone in the Christmas chord—the tone of sadness—“there was no room for them in the inn.” If you are a stranger to the first two tones, the third applies to you. This Christmas, may you permit that tone to be changed from sadness to a song of praise through the story of a Savior sent for you.

Hans Edvard Wisløff (1902–1969) was a Norwegian theologian and writer. He was also the Bishop of the Diocese of Sør-Hålogaland from 1959 until his death in 1969.

Wisløff, H.E., Quiet Moments on the Way Home. Fergus Falls, MN: Faith & Fellowship Press, 1993.

Home for Christmas

TROY TYSDAL

Christmas Eve dinner cooked and waiting on the table. The presents wrapped and under the tree. The children anxious and ready to get started, but mother insisting that they wait for father. He had been scheduled to work the day shift at the local production plant—twelve hours of packaging and loading before the facility shut down for Christmas. The children watched the front door in anticipation, but the door didn't open.

Father should have been home hours ago. Now mother waits, the dinner ruined, and the children put to bed. She has little doubt as to where father is, and tears fill her eyes—knowing he won't be home until morning. Their young daughter, hoping to catch a glimpse of Santa Claus, sneaks from her bedroom, only to watch from a distance as her mother weeps. Years later, she learns where her father was that night, and my heart breaks as she relives the pain, and expresses her unbelief in a God who could offer a man like her father forgiveness.

ISAIAH 53:4-6

Isaiah prophesies of Jesus, "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

It is hard to believe that God might save the wicked. It is hard to accept that faith in Jesus Christ might remove the sins of a life that has caused us only pain. We want vengeance. We demand it, but the Lord says that vengeance belongs to him (Deuteronomy 32:35). He tells us, "I will



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bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing..." (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

Sometimes we refuse to forgive, because we want to see our tormentors suffer—we want to see them feel the pain they have caused us. Perhaps we desire this because we haven't properly understood the crucifixion. We have not pictured the crown of thorns forced down upon our tormentor's head. We haven't heard the crack of the whip, or seen the rip of the flesh. We haven't heard the clang of the hammer, or the thud of the post as it is dropped into the ground. We haven't seen Jesus for all that he is—not just our own personal savior, but the savior of our enemy as well.

Vengeance, indeed, belongs to the Lord, for unto us a child was born, unto us a son was given (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus did not come to save the righteous, but the unrighteous, and all who declare with their mouths that he is Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead will be saved (Romans 10:9). No exceptions, no matter how wicked.

We have all failed to come home for Christmas. We have all betrayed trust, left

our loved ones waiting. We have all lied, stolen, been unfaithful, pursued our own pleasure and gain. Yet, for those of us in Christ Jesus, the wrath of God is satisfied. The blood of Jesus is indeed enough.

Repent—turn from your sin and trust in him. He came for the unfaithful, the liar, and the thief. He is enough for the father who failed to come home, the mother who is lost in her grief, and the child who needs to forgive.

Call on him, and he will come to you. He has never failed to do so. Everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

Rev. Troy Tysdal is Director of Communications and Prayer for the Church of the Lutheran Brethren, and serves as editor in chief of Faith & Fellowship magazine.



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A Seemingly Insignificant Savior

MATT RIENIETS

We are naturally drawn to the flash and drama of a powerful savior. The Chicago Bears fan base has been abuzz recently with their addition of the highest paid defensive player in the NFL—Khalil Mack (7yr/\$154m). Similarly, the Los Angeles Lakers are looking forward to testing out their own expensive weapon against their foes in the NBA, LeBron James (4yr/\$154m). Both players pitched their services to their new bosses in their respective sports on the basis of their power and influence. In their interviews,

they both basically said, “Yes, my services are expensive, but you can’t afford *not* to hire me. I can do what no one else on earth can do. And if you don’t hire me, I’ll go play for your opponents.” Both of those teams agreed.

But it isn’t just sports teams that look to a powerful savior. We also look for a strong military and a strong economy to protect us from harm and poverty. The history of U.S. elections shows that we are quick to trust the candidate who says he or she can save us from our adversaries. Inside, we fear that our peace, security,

and morals as a people are at risk if the other side gets in power. We think we need a mighty deliverer. So we look, not to a weakling, but to a strong leader who can save us from our perceived enemies.

We live in a dog-eat-dog world where the strongest survive the longest, and having the strongest dog on your side seems like the surest way to survive. Life has taught us this truth, so we look for saviors to protect us. But this is what makes Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth so remarkable. Jesus doesn’t present himself to us as a strongman savior who

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Luke 2:11-12

intimidates his enemies. Rather, he comes as a child—one who, on the surface, seems remarkably insignificant.

To be sure, the angelic proclamation of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds in the field must have been a visually striking scene. After all, it isn’t every day that the army of heaven suddenly appears and gives a birth announcement for the Savior of the world. This was a big deal! But compare the angelic proclamation to the scene in Bethlehem.

There’s no welcome party for Mary and Joseph. There’s no hospital, no well-trained physicians, no comfortable bed, no climate-controlled room, no hypoallergenic bedding or clothing. Instead, we have a man and his pregnant fiancée who had to make a long journey to pay their taxes, who arrive at their destination only to find out that there is nowhere for them to stay, and who then realize that they aren’t just on a nice vacation to go pay taxes (always a desired vacation activity), but are now going to give birth to a baby.

The extravagance of the angelic proclamation just doesn’t seem to fit the human circumstances of this baby’s birth. The angels thought the birth of Jesus was something so momentous that it was worth celebrating, but the people around Mary and Joseph didn’t even set aside a room for a pregnant woman to give birth in. To them, this was just an

insignificant baby (Isaiah 53:2-3) born to an insignificant man and woman (Luke 1:48) from an insignificant town (John 1:46).

This is how Jesus presents himself to us—as a baby. He came to save the world, but first, he’ll need his diaper changed. He will perform many miracles one day, but first, he’ll need to get through puberty. He will have the name that is above all other names, but first, he’ll just be known as that one son of Joseph (Luke 4:22). This Son of God, who is existent from eternity past, revealed himself to his creation by humbling himself, by presenting himself as anything but significant.

This gets to the heart of what the gospel is. It is the *good news* of God lowering himself to serve us, by living like us, by suffering like us, and ultimately by dying for us, so that we might be restored to a right relationship with him and properly worship and serve him as the one who is above all others (Philippians 2:5-11). His significance as our Savior is only revealed to us when we first see him in his seemingly insignificant state. This is why the angels can proclaim about this seemingly insignificant child, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”

But this Jesus was not just the Savior of those shepherds in Luke’s Gospel. He is your Savior too. He is your Messiah. He is your Lord. This baby boy, wrapped in

insignificant baby clothes, was eventually stripped of all of his clothes and nailed to a tree so that you might be clothed in his spotless righteousness. This baby boy, lying in a manger, eventually laid down his life for you, so that one day, though you die, you can live forever in perfect peace with him and with all those on whom his favor rests. He may seem insignificant, but he couldn’t be more significant for me and for you.

Matt Rienets is a second year Master of Divinity student at Lutheran Brethren Seminary in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.



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Advent

Hope to Come

BRENT ANDREWS

The bang of the gavel echoed throughout the courtroom. For a moment I felt as if I was dreaming. In a flash, nearly a decade of memories, experiences, friendships and my marriage began fading away like a morning mist disappears from a deep valley as the sun appears. As I exited the courtroom and made my way out of the courthouse I was greeted by the grayness of a December afternoon giving way to the approaching evening. A harsh blast of a cold easterly wind pelted my face with mist and snow. I didn't really feel it, I didn't feel anything—just the numbness of uncertainty, wondering what was next, what was I to do now?

I can't tell you how long it took me to drive home that day, nor the route I took. I entered my house. It was dark

and silent... empty. Items missing from the rooms and walls led to a deep mixture of emotions welling up inside me; anger, sadness, doubt, grief... uncertainty. Divorce is such a difficult thing. So many people impacted, so much physical and emotional devastation experienced. How was I to recover from this? This wasn't how I expected my life to go.

Over two thousand years ago many Jews were wondering if the promises passed down from generation to generation would ever come true. In a land occupied by a tyrannical governor and the invading armies of Rome, the people lived in a state of fear and oppression—like a feeling of being abandoned and divorced from God. Is it any wonder that people were struggling with anger, sadness, doubt, grief ... uncertainty?

Imagine the shepherd, the innkeeper, a young girl or the struggling carpenter looking into the darkness of the night sky and wondering, praying for the Lord God of Abraham to send a savior. Where was the “servant” the prophet Isaiah spoke of that would “bring justice to the nations” (42:1) and “gather Israel to himself” (49:5)? Where was the promised Messiah? This wasn't the life they had expected.

Power, prestige, a show of strength were all qualities most Jews were looking for in the King/Savior promised to come. And yet isn't God's Story one of opposites and redemption... the first will be last, the weak become strong, the lost are found? Whether it be a tongue-tied fugitive like Moses, the betrayer Jacob, David the adulterous murderer, or Rahab

“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”

Isaiah 53:7

the harlot, God takes the broken, outcast and weak and includes them as part of his eternal plan for the redemption of the world.

Advent is often understood to mean *coming*. People of the past, not unlike people of today, were looking for something or someone to come to turn their fortunes to what they “expected them to be.” All too often we hope for and anticipate an “Advent Event” not unlike the Jews of that day. We want the struggles and trials of this world to be whisked away. We look for relief from the muck and grime of this world. Yet Advent is so much more than that.

Advent reminds us of the promise that the “servant” of Isaiah would also suffer physical pain and humiliation (50:6; 52:14; 53:3-5,7) and that his suffering would help accomplish the work he was called to do by ultimately taking away the sins and guilt of others (53:4,5,10,11) through sacrificially giving his life. Advent signifies the coming of God’s salvation, as testified by Simeon when he sees and holds the child Jesus after waiting a lifetime. “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (Luke 2:30-32).

The revealed light was not the announcement of a powerful warrior-king for which many had yearned, but

rather a weak and seemingly helpless child. God in flesh, Emmanuel— “God with us.” They didn’t get what they expected. All their woes weren’t fixed. They didn’t understand that lives would change forever because redemption had come.

Redemption is messy because the lives of those being redeemed are messy and often stay messy. No matter the struggles you face, or the life you have experienced, the Savior continues to come. He comes in the weakness and frailty of the child into this sin-stained world and redeems the angry, the sad, the grief-stricken, the hopeless, the lost. God reached down into this world in the person of his Son Christ Jesus and offered us something far greater than what we expected... to be washed white as snow, to be forgiven.

The coming Christ-child of two thousand years ago also came to me that dark and silent night in December a decade ago. Although he did not remove all the consequences of my divorce, he brought me hope. It was a hope that he wouldn’t count my mistakes against me even if others did. Hope that new beginnings can come from difficult circumstances. Hope that my sin does not define me or God’s plan for my life. Hope that one day, despite my sin, God will welcome me into eternity—all because of the *One* who came to us in Bethlehem.

Like those people of thousands of years ago, you may be waiting for the

Savior to fix all your problems, to make the mess go away. The Lord may or may not allow that to happen. Maybe despite your redemption you will continue to face the consequences of your sin for the remainder of your life. Yet this is not the end, because in Christ even these consequences bear the promise of hope to come.

Brent Andrews serves Lutheran Brethren Seminary in Fergus Falls, Minnesota as Media Specialist and Information Services Librarian.



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Bought With a Price

GRETCHEN RONNEVIK

“I could never do that. It would hurt too much.”

I don’t know how I ended up so lucky, but several of my friends are foster parents, and some even became adoptive parents. We try to support them to the best of our ability, and we get to witness the glorious and heartbreaking side of this ministry.

It’s entering into someone’s mess, knowing you’ll get hurt, for the other person’s good.

It’s easy to put my friends on a pedestal. But the puzzling question on my heart is why *God* would put skin on and walk among us—in our mess, in the world we

defiled—then suffer and die for broken people like us?

He loves us in our sin, reaches into our messy lives, and most tenderly of all, *God is with us*.

Even when our heart’s desire is to follow Christ, we still seek self-preservation. We fear pain, and we seek pleasure. “I could never do that” might be one of the most common things we say to those whose ministry is working with people living in pain, trauma, and suffering—basically *all* ministry. Invite that mess into the intimacy of your home, and you’re verging on the edge of crazy.

“So if there is any encouragement in

Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:1-5, ESV).

It’s the season for charitable gifts, packing shoeboxes, and picking names off an Angel tree. Sometimes it feels like

“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 2:4-5, ESV

it’s all just a knee-jerk response to the excess and materialism of the season, to keep ourselves and our children well-rounded. We want to teach our children what the season is “really about.” But no matter how we try, I wonder if we will ever even begin to come close to it.

How do we do this, exactly? How do we engage in incarnational ministry, where we willingly enter into someone else’s mess, in a way that will cost us dearly, for their benefit, without elevating our pride, without a “good works” motive? The answer is in the Scriptures, right there in Philippians 2:5. “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”

Way back in the Garden of Eden, our hearts were twisted by this desire to be “like God.” But we weren’t thinking about being godly; we wanted to be god-like apart from God. Independent from God. Equal to God.

Back in the Garden of Eden, we walked with God. Post-Pentecost, God did one better. He lives inside us. Yet we are not God. We become his temple, and he works through us. When Jesus was born of Mary, God took on flesh, and dwelt among us. When he died, was raised again, and ascended to heaven, Jesus sent his indwelling Spirit to us. God has taken our bodies, dead in sin, and through the gift of faith and baptism breathed his own breath once again into us.

This isn’t about social justices, or

“loving like Jesus loved,” as though he were merely an example to follow. This isn’t being god-like, or worshiped for our sacrifice. This is incarnational ministry that is actually fueled by God’s love in us... not our love that is independent of God’s power.

People say to us, “Jesus did this, do likewise.” Our response is to pull up our bootstraps and crack our knuckles, and get to work on all of this godliness business. But that’s not what Jesus did. Jesus did not seek works outside of his Father. (Look at the temptation from Satan.)

This prayer of Jesus expresses the reality of his incarnation:

“Sanctify them in truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they may also be sanctified in truth. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:17-21, ESV).

When we lived in Eden, God gave us work—not so we could earn his pleasure, but as a gift. It makes sense that he would restore that as well. He does not need our sacrifice, as his own was the

only sufficient sacrifice. However, his sacrificial love lives in us. It breathes in and out of us. It is not merely natural, but it’s supernatural for us to be involved in the ministry of being *with* someone in their pain.

Incarnational ministry is not simply entering into someone else’s mess, at an extreme cost, for their benefit. It’s a ministry powered by God’s Spirit in us.

This type of ministry will always point back to Christ, and his sufficiency, not ours. It will often feel helpless and painful. It will refine *your* heart as much as the person you minister to. It’s the understanding that we are not our own, we were bought with a price.

Gretchen Ronnevik is a farmwife, mother and teacher to six children. She is a writer, designer, and aspiring biblical scholar.

Follow Gretchen at: www.gretchenronnevik.com

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2018-19 Contribution Goal

The CLB Fiscal Year Ends April 30, 2019

Holiday or Holy Day? What really matters?

ROY HEGGLAND

As another Christmas approaches, we again face the dichotomy between a deeply spiritual celebration and a highly commercialized seasonal event. One way of understanding how Christmas has become, for many, a completely secular “holiday” rather than a blessed “Holy Day” is to look at how materialistic it has become.

Especially in the US and Canada, the rise of consumerism has meant that, for most people, the Christmas season is filled with partying, shopping and buying, giving and getting more gifts than anyone could possibly use, and enjoying family gatherings which may not include much of a spiritual dimension. Is it wrong for us as Christians to engage in many of the same activities as others who are not part of God’s family? Has materialism invaded our homes and families during this wonderful time of year?

The dictionary describes materialism as “a tendency to consider material possessions and physical comfort as more important than spiritual values; the doctrine that nothing exists except matter.”

I think it is interesting that it is not *having* many things (presents, foods, shopping, personal comfort, etc.) that equates to materialism, but rather the *attitude* toward those things—considering them more important than spiritual values or believing that nothing else exists except for created things. As Christians we certainly don’t fall into the category of those who believe nothing other than matter exists (although we may sometimes live that way). But do we



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live as though created things have more value or worth than the One who created us?

Recently I heard a message on the topic of worship. The word *worship* actually comes from the words *worth* and *ship*—or “worthship.” So when we worship the Lord, we are ascribing to him worth above all else. Revelation 4:11 puts it this way, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” How do we live in a worshipful way? Colossians 3:23-24 answers that question: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

True worship can be thought of as the antidote to materialism. If everything we do is done for Christ in an attitude

of worship, as Colossians 3 describes, then it will be impossible for us, at the same time, to consider material things as more important than Christ. This is true not just at Christmas but throughout the year. True worship focuses all we think and do on offering our best to Christ. Can that include Christmas parties, shopping, exchanging gifts and family gatherings? Of course. But those things will never become the main thing for us if we are doing everything for the Lord.

During this Christmas season, as we come together in our congregations and families to worship Jesus who came to bring life to us, let us be Colossian worshippers: Enjoy the things and people around us as we live in worship to the God who created, saved and sustains us.

Roy Heggland is Associate for Biblical Stewardship for the Church of the Lutheran Brethren.

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The Most Wonderful Time of the Year: Why is it so Hard?

KAREN STENBERG

It's that time of the year again, as the song goes, "The most wonderful time of the year!" I do love this time of year. I enjoy all the get-togethers and parties. But let's face it. Christmas is not without its challenges. Oh, so many challenges...

Christmas is a time when we should be filled with hope, joy and thankfulness. We look back and can be thankful for the birth of Jesus and his coming. In the present we can be thankful for all that he has done for us, that leads to our forgiveness and salvation. And as we look to the future, we can be thankful Jesus is coming again and for our eternity with him.

Yet, it's so easy to fall into discontentment during this season; so easy to see all the things we don't have; so easy to compare our lives with others. As I have become more aware of this mental battle, it has helped me to recognize these lies before they can take root. Then I can redirect those thoughts, and take that struggle to prayer.

Another big challenge is in the many expectations. There are cookie exchanges, gift exchanges, Christmas cards to write, family gatherings, and gatherings with friends. All this is on top of your normal week of work and school schedules.

How do we do it all? We can't. Something somewhere has to give. And then if you are like me, you feel guilty about it. I really like the concept of spending more time doing what you love at Christmas and letting go of those things that you really don't enjoy. This is so freeing for me. Focus more on my giftings and less on the checklist. Take time to love on people or let others love on you! Let your gifts and abilities shine.



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Don't get bogged down by unrealistic expectations.

After all, Christmas is about Christ. It's about the grace God showed us in giving us the gift of Jesus. The gift of grace that we don't deserve. As I think on this great gift of grace, I'm reminded that this gift should be the "lens" through which I see this season: Showing others grace and showing myself grace as I rest in Christ's finished work. Looking through this lens is the only way I am able to let go of "all the things" and find spiritual rest and joy during this busy season.

Pointing my kids to the true reason for the season—this is just part of our daily conversation. In our nightly prayers, we thank God for the birth of Jesus, for sending his Son. We do some advent things with the kids as well... but that's a work in progress. I just keep praying that God will open their eyes to his grace that is shown for them at Christmas.

For now, I will stick to what I love and what works for this season of life, baking for others, baking with my kids, parties,

Christmas movies, and curling up on the couch with a book as the snow falls...

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him" (Romans 15:13).

Karen Stenberg attends Calvary Lutheran Church in Bergenfield, New Jersey—where her husband Daniel serves as pastor.



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On May 8, 2018, Chris Hartley was ordained at LB Fellowship Church in Williston, North Dakota. The Hartleys with Pastor Jason Lang (L to R): Isabelle, Chris, Grant, Jason Lang, and Lyssa.

Two Sides of the Discipleship Coin

CHRIS HARTLEY AND JASON LANG

Chris Hartley: Recently I stood in front of my congregation for my ordination. I can only describe it as a truly surreal moment. Jason Lang, who was leading the service, had walked with me from the days when I had a near-agnostic attitude to becoming a baptized believer to now being an ordained pastor. God had used our relationship to bring me to that very moment in time. Had I been able to fully comprehend everything that had to line up just perfectly in both of our lives to make that happen, I likely would have been too overwhelmed to speak.

“Discipleship” or “Disciple-making” are phrases that get thrown around Christian circles a lot, but in my adult life, I have lived it, becoming the beneficiary of the Lord’s work through one of his servants. The following is just a tiny glimpse into what that looked like. Jason and I share this with you because, if we desire to be a part of a disciple-making movement, we have to understand what it looks like in people’s lives.

Jason Lang: My dad (Pastor Paul Lang) sat next to a guy named Derek while

waiting in the chiropractor’s office. As they talked about phones and schedules, Derek asked, “What’s all this church stuff on your calendar?” And Paul answered, “Oh, I’m a pastor with Emmaus Road Church.” The conversation continued and Paul invited Derek to join us for worship. Derek wasn’t following Jesus at the time, but he invited his best friends to come with him. That’s how Chris and his family came to our church that Sunday.

Chris: When I first started going to church in my mid-twenties I was

Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.”

John 15:16

completely reluctant. I can say with all honesty that my wife and friends had pressured me into going.

But it was pretty much what they said it would be: good music, it wasn't boring, the people were friendly enough, and so it was okay to go. However, after only attending Emmaus Road for about a month, a new pastor in the church (Jason) asked me out to lunch. I remember thinking, “Is this weird? I don't even really know this guy.” But I agreed anyway. That lunch turned into an invitation for my family to come over to his house for a cook-out.

Jason: I only got to see Chris for a few minutes after Worship Gathering on Sundays, and not every Sunday, so I thought the best way to get to know Chris was to invite him to the house with his friends and family. So everyone came over.

Chris: I remember being on my guard as I entered because: “I'm at the pastor's house; it's time to be on my best behavior.” Yet what I saw when I went to the backyard disarmed me, completely took my defenses down. Jason was casually grilling up some food and sipping on a beer. I was blown away thinking, “Is he allowed to do that?” For the rest of that evening, I was amazed at how easy it was to talk to him and how down to earth he was. It's not at all what I expected.

From that point on, Jason was very intentional about spending time with me, asking me a lot of questions, valuing my input, and offering opportunities for me to get involved in what was going on in the church. I felt completely valued

and cared for. The Lord also used him to minister to me in incredibly difficult moments when I didn't know where else to go.

Jason: Chris invited me over to watch an MMA fight they were streaming, I don't watch much MMA, but I say “yes” as often as I can. We just kept hanging out with Chris and Lyssa and their kids and friends. When we started a Tweens group for 4th-6th graders I invited Chris to lead with me. He insisted he didn't know what to do, so I said, “Just do what I do. Care for these kids, play games, have fun, open your Bible when I'm in my Bible, read what I read. When I'm eating dinner with my family, you bring your family for dinner.” Before long I asked Chris to share the message at Tweens. He insisted he didn't know how, so we worked on it together. He was sharing the gospel as he was believing it. Tweens, Youth Group, Worship... It wasn't long before Chris and his family found themselves believing in Jesus, and I baptized Chris and his kids, with Lyssa right there with us. We followed Jesus together.

Chris: There are hundreds of other moments I could also talk about, but as I have reflected on the road from non-believer to ordained minister (in about 10 years), I see the Lord's leading in Jason's life now being worked out in mine through his willingness to create a new disciple.

Jason: Chris and I are tight friends. We get to follow Jesus together, we talk about God and life, and we pray together. We are still following Jesus together even

though neither of us live in DeWitt, Iowa anymore. Jesus changed Chris' life, his family, his friends, his career, his passion. It was such a huge privilege to be a part of Chris' ordination, walking with him on this faith journey from doing his own thing to believing in Christ Jesus, serving in the Church, growing in faith. And then to support him in Seminary all the way to his ordination as a pastor serving God and his people.

Chris, keep following Jesus and inviting people to follow him with you. That's discipleship!

You who are reading this, you can do it too. Discipleship is following Jesus and sharing it with people around you. Invite families over for lunch, hang out with them, and follow Jesus together.

Rev. Christopher Hartley serves as associate pastor at LB Fellowship Church in Williston, North Dakota.

Rev. Jason Lang serves as pastor of Word of Life Lutheran Brethren Church in LeSueur, Minnesota.



CLB Mission Mobilizer and Recruiter Dan Venberg sharing the gospel in Chad.

Famine Relief and the Gospel

DAN VENBERG

At a town in Chad I pulled off the main road and navigated the Toyota Land Cruiser in between mud houses and through narrow alleys with inches to spare. A Chadian Lutheran Brethren missionary colleague, directed me to a house where we picked up the village chief, and then we continued on our way. We left the village behind and drove on a cattle path through the bush until we arrived at the refugee settlement. We pulled up next to a brand-new water well that Lutheran Brethren International Missions's Living Waters ministry had installed a couple weeks earlier. Hot and dusty from the long drive, we tumbled out of the vehicle and enjoyed a cool drink from the well. Some men quickly gathered around, pumping our hands and welcoming us. They then helped us unload from the vehicle sacks of mosquito nets,

tarps and blankets—purchased through CLB donations. The men hefted these on their shoulders and invited us to follow them.

Walking through the settlement of shelters hastily constructed with straw and wooden poles, I was struck by the resilience of these displaced people. They lived on the fine line of subsistence survival, and yet seemed content—smiling at me, shaking my hand, laughing in pleasant surprise as I spoke a language they understood. We soon came to the one mud structure in the camp, where we deposited the bundles. The men showed us a large pile of sacks of grain, distributed a couple of days earlier by truck. This grain was also purchased by CLB donations. We were then directed to a mat spread out in the shade of a tree. A young man started heating charcoal in a

wire brazier and ran off to fetch a small pot, some tea leaves and sugar. As we waited for the tea to be served, I asked the men to share with me their stories. Abdel spoke first.

A year and a half prior, Abdel lived in peace and contentment with his family in the Central African Republic (CAR). He owned a herd of cattle, raising them and selling them as needed to support his family. He is of the *Wodaabe* people, a nomadic tribe related to the larger *Fulbe* tribe found all over central and western Africa. He was relatively wealthy and respected in his community. He is a Muslim.

CAR has been without a stable government for years. Rebel groups and civilian militia have taken up arms, attempting to gain political power and control through violence. Genocide,

religious persecution, child soldiers, senseless death... all this has become the norm in CAR.

One day, a violent civilian militia came into Abdel's community. They called themselves "anti-balaka." Many of them also call themselves Christians. They have come to hate Muslims because of Muslim militia groups that have persecuted their people. These men came into Abdel's village and demanded all the cattle and livestock. They killed any who stood in their way. They forced Abdel to stand against a wall at gun point and threatened to kill him. In the end, they locked him in a small hut. For two days he sat there without food and water, not knowing what had happened to his wife and children. The second night he escaped and fled through the bush. He made his way north to Chad. He met up with others from his own people and they made their way here, settling near the town of Kouno. He is now trying to make a new life for himself by subsistence farming, the only option available to him.

Abdel has managed to locate his wife and one of his children. Others are missing and unaccounted for. He has brothers and friends that were confirmed dead due to the violence. After recounting his story, Abdel looked at me and said, "Thank you for your help here. Without your care, many of us would not be alive today."

He showed me his hands, and said: "I was a herdsman. I know nothing about farming. But that is the only way that I have open to me. I am not a farmer. But I will become a farmer. I will do what I need to do to survive and to care for my family. Thank you for your help. May God grant you paradise because of the good you have done!"

How do you even respond to that! Here is a man who has suffered greatly. And the suffering has come at the hands of those who call themselves Christians. And then he meets other Christians who come to his aid. Imagine the conflict in his life, in his soul.

I shared with Abdel how humbled I was to meet him and to witness his story and his resilience. I shared with him that

the help provided by the Church of the Lutheran Brethren is not about us being "good," but rather about God's love for his creation, and his call to us to love him and all people in return.

We continued to visit with these refugees for the rest of the afternoon. During our conversation, we shared with them the gospel, the message of Jesus Christ, who died and rose again for us, for them, and for the men who killed some of Abdel's family. I shared that the "good" that we do does not earn us favor with God; rather it is faith in the finished work of Christ that saves us.

As I left Abdel that day, I praised God for the opportunity we had, through the ministry of LBIM, to pass on both physical blessing and the message of Christ to people who so desperately need both. Many churches and individuals in the CLB have contributed to the famine relief fund, making this ministry possible. Our LBIM missionaries and national colleagues evaluate the needs every year and manage funds accordingly. We have invested in over 30 similar refugee settlements. Typically, about 75% of the funds designated to this ministry are used to purchase grain, as famine is a prioritized need. Tarps, blankets and mosquito nets are also purchased, primarily for distribution in refugee settlements such as this one. These supplies are stored and later distributed, following a plan approved by LBIM. Most of these communities have also received water wells through LBIM. Our field missionaries are intentional about an ongoing relationship with the recipient communities, for the sake of the gospel.

Thank you for your contributions to this ministry. You might be rubbing shoulders with Abdel in heaven one day!

Dan Venberg serves as the Mission Mobilizer and Recruiter for Lutheran Brethren International Mission.

WHO'S NEXT?

*Is the Lord calling you to International Mission?
Contact: dvenberg@LBIM.org*





Isaiah Bai in the Christiansen Memorial Library at Lutheran Brethren Seminary.

“Who Will Go For Me?”

ISAIAH BAI

My name is Yuwei Bai (pronounced as You-way Bye), which means “something precious in the universe.” I am from Shanghai, China’s biggest city, with a population of 24 million people. (Texas has 28 million people.) I was not raised in a Christian family, but a Muslim one. However, we were not a typical Muslim family such as you would encounter in the Middle East, who pray five times a day according to the teaching of Islam. The only commandment we kept was not to eat pork, and none of us knew the reason why. It was a “do because I said so” type of thing.

Though a Muslim by blood, I lived a secular life just as anyone else around me. I went to school and studied Atheism and Maoism. However, I had always been curious about religion. I had been to Buddhist temples a couple of times, where I bowed before the golden statues, praying for health and good grades. Interestingly, one has to purchase a ticket in order to be admitted into the temple.

In 2012, an audacious idea occurred in my mind: Why not study in the United States? Following my American Dream, I first needed to register for TOEFL classes to gain eloquence in English. On the way home from class, I passed by a church

built in 1874 in downtown Shanghai. Discovering I did not need to pay an admission fee to enter and visit, I sat down in the sanctuary and listened to my very first sermon: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The concept of sin was brand new to me. I had committed no crime and lived as morally as a teen could. The message caught my attention and forced me to return to the church. With my interest in Christianity growing, I wanted to be baptized. However, the church would not baptize me unless I sat through ten classes and collected enough stamps. Consequently, I went to a house church (AKA underground church) that was not willing to be regulated by the government. The first and only thing I told them was, “I want to be baptized.” So, I was baptized in a bath tub.

In September 2012, I came to the University of Oregon to study Business Administration. In the student center, the local Chinese church was giving invitations to students to join their Friday night dinner and fellowship. Who can resist free food? I thought it would be impolite to eat and then leave without participating in the Bible study, so I stayed. In that very first visit to the church, I started reading the Word of God. Drawn into the promise and fulfillment of the

Scripture, I wanted to study more about God.

God touched my heart. I watched a YouTube video of the preacher Stephen Tong, who spent his entire adult life sharing the good news of Christ. He said, “I’m 70. I’m old. How long can I serve the Church? Where are the young Christians? The younger generation should take their responsibilities to serve the Church, to go preach the Word.” Tong’s words left me in deep contemplation. I opened the Bible and tried to look for guidance. My gaze fell upon the place where God called Isaiah the prophet. “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying. ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” (Isaiah 6:8).

I thought, “Isn’t God asking me the same question?” Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? It was my turn to answer God’s calling. “Here I am, Lord. Send me!” I then asked my friends to start calling me Isaiah because I wanted to be like him—to be used as an instrument for God’s work.

I transferred to a local Pentecostal-based Christian college as the initial step of preparation for ministry. Three years of study soon passed. In order to graduate, the students needed to have a church internship. At the time I was serving an

ELCA church, but the church was in transition to call their permanent pastor, so they could not provide an intern position for me. I called a list of Lutheran churches, but only one person answered my call. Dr. Daniel Berge was pastoring Immanuel Lutheran Church in Eugene. He invited me for a visit and later called me to be an intern under him. Knowing that I was on my journey to be an ELCA pastoral candidate and ready to move to Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota with my wife Kaitlin, Dr. Berge introduced me to Lutheran Brethren Seminary, and set up a call with LBS President David Veum.

It was a call that changed my life. As I was sharing my background with Dr. Veum, I mentioned that my family belongs to a people group who practice Islam. He asked if it was the Hui people group. I said, yes. There was a long period of silence. A shattered voice came with a sob, "Really? We have been praying for you!"

From the minutes of the September 25, 2003 meeting of the board of Lutheran Brethren International Mission:

“‘Motion Made Seconded and Carried: LBIM adopt the Hui as a people group.’ The board paused for a time of prayer, committing us to the responsibilities of this adoption, especially to prayer before the Lord of the harvest, to raise up workers to be sent to the Hui.”

In August 2017, I enrolled in the Master of Divinity program at Lutheran Brethren Seminary. Spending my first year online, I moved to Fergus Falls, MN in August 2018. I enjoy studying in the Seminary where people are in training to be the hands and feet of Christ.

This all started with that prayer in 2003. My brothers and sisters, I really appreciate your prayers throughout the years, keeping the unreached and nonbelieving people in your minds. Prayer is the purest act of love among the children of God. Our heavenly Father does not neglect our prayers. Please continue to pray that the Lord raise up laborers for the harvest.

Isaiah Bai is from Shanghai, China. He is a second year seminarian at Lutheran Brethren Seminary in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.



*Is God calling you into the ministry?
Visit: www.LBS.edu*

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YOUTH

ROM 1:17

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YC19.org



Matt Schweitzer

Worship Speakers



Dave Veum



Troy Tysdal

Johnson Ordained as Elder



L to R: Congregational Chairman Jim Hanson, Rev. Pat Thurmer, Elder Jordan Johnson, Regional Pastor Warren Geraghty, and Elder Jim Teeter.

On September 2, 2018, Jordan Johnson was ordained as an elder at Living Faith Church in Cape Coral, Florida. Regional Pastor Warren Geraghty officiated.

Laven Installed



Photo from Faith LB Installation. L to R: Elder Arnold Betzema, Pastors Nick Laven, Rev. Danny Krauss, Elders Brian Brandon, Gary Lafrentz, and Regional Pastor Roger Olson.

On September 9, 2018, Pastor Nick Laven was installed at Trinity Lutheran Church in Torquay, SK and Faith LB Church in Estevan, SK. Regional Pastor Roger Olson officiated.

Kjolhaug Ordained



L to R: Regional Pastor Warren Geraghty, Rev. Lukas Kjolhaug, Rev. Bruce Hillman, Elders Pete Kjolhaug, Glenn Arnesen, Dean DeKok, Rev. John Maltby, Elders Matt Dekok and Keith Dunham.

On September 23, 2018, Lukas Kjolhaug was ordained as pastor at Bunker Hill LBC in Princeton, New Jersey. Regional Pastor Warren Geraghty led the service.

Rokos and Osterwalder Installed



L to R: Elders Rob Lewis, Doug MacKay, Rev. Harold Rust, Pastor Greg Rokos, Regional Pastor Roger Olson, Pastor Jeremy Osterwalder, Elders Dennis Rude, and Guy Labrecque.

On August 26, 2018, Greg Rokos and Jeremy Osterwalder were installed as pastors at Resurrection LB Church in Camrose, Alberta. Regional Pastor Roger Olson officiated.

Couch Ordained



L to R: Rev. Anthony Karlik, Elder James Bossert, Rev. Andy Olsen, Elder Allan Nilsen, Rev. Paul Couch, Rev. Warren Geraghty, Elders Ted Jackson, Dennis Sunwall, and David Burfeind.

On September 22, 2018, Paul Couch was ordained as pastor at Bethany Lutheran Brethren Church in Staten Island, New York. Regional Pastor Warren Geraghty led the service.

Smith Installed



L to R: Regional Pastor Stan Olsen, Elder Mike Boyum, Pastor Zach Smith, Elders Phil Solheim, Peter Tweed and Duane Patterson.

On September 23, 2018, Zach Smith was installed as pastor at Bethany Lutheran Brethren Church in West Union, Iowa. Regional Pastor Stan Olsen officiated.

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No Soap Opera Christmas

I saw a TV show about a Scandinavian woman who was cut off by her parents at age 16 because she wouldn't live by the strict rules of their religion—one that we would consider a cult. The young woman grew up and had a daughter of her own. When the daughter became an adult, she met the grandmother she had never known and established a relationship with her. The mother—now the one in the middle—rejected her daughter for relating to the hated grandmother.

All of this was disappointing to me, because I thought I was watching a news reporter-police-mystery program, and here it had degenerated into a soap opera. “What an unrealistic scenario!” I thought. “Who would actually play the ‘you have to hate the people I hate, or you’re no friend of mine’ game? It’s so childish!”

Or is it? I mean, it is childish. But it’s also a familiar game, played out in many relationships, or should we say non-relationships.

What causes us more grief than broken relationships? And what season of the year do we feel the pain of damaged relationships more than at Christmas—the stereotypical ideal family time?

This is a sad irony, because Christmas is all about relationship. This is not to say it’s all about family gatherings, spending time with the people you love. That’s a wonderful benefit, but it’s not the reason for the season. No, the relationship at the heart of Christmas is between God and you. This relationship was fractured by sin in the early days of the human race. We are all born with that sad heritage. But God plays no games. He doesn’t hate those who hate him. He re-initiated a relationship with those who had rejected him.

He sent his Son for you. “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11). Born *to you!* Believe it’s true. Receive that gift-of-grace baby. Accept his gracious invitation to a restored relationship with the God who loves you.

If we have Jesus, will all our human relationships be restored as well? Not necessarily. But the heart of God for our relationships is revealed in John the Baptist’s commission: “He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents” (Malachi 4:6a). We who are forgiven are now empowered by him to forgive others. We really can ensure that there are no barriers to relationship on our side.

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). So, Merry Christmas!

Rev. Brent Juliot is Editor of Faith & Fellowship magazine and serves as pastor of Oak Ridge Lutheran Brethren Church in Menomonie, Wisconsin.

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