

**FROM THE
PASTOR'S DESK**

Rob Rolfe • 619 S. State, Lamoni, IA 50140 • 614-784-6030

Retirement Planning

One of the things we will be reading and hearing about in 2005 is Social Security. Perhaps it would be better to call it Social Insecurity. Ever since the Carter Administration (although the seeds of destruction started earlier) there has been no money in the so-called Social Security Trust Fund. In other words, our government spent the money, put an IOU in the account, and then has been paying interest on the the IOU. No one needs to be an actuary or math genius to realize that our government now has several options, none of them good for politicians. It can raise taxes (everyone loves this option) or lower benefits (most won't like this option) or do both. (Everyone will be mad) If you are a member of the House of Representatives and have to run for election every two years, which option would you select? To do nothing will be an even worse option! Nothing is what has been done. (Which is why the trust fund is currently facing such daunting shortfalls of funds to pay benefits)

Have you ever thought that your relationship with Jesus Christ might be like the options we're facing in Social Security? We all want to be well taken care of, or be secure. We don't want to trust God for the security, however. To take care of our own security, we can "raise taxes" (in other words pay more into savings and retirement for ourselves) or buy and consume a lot less than we now do, "lower benefits" or do both. Will exercising these options place our retirement account with God on a sound basis? What can we do today to make sure we're protected? Fire Insurance?

Continued on page 14

**TESTIMONIES AND
SERMON NOTES**

**Living For Christ-
For Eternity!**

In his characteristic way, Brother Rodney Bastow began his sermon with applications of his topic in life. "Once upon a time", he began, "when I was a lot younger, we had a Sunday School teacher that we called Aunt Otha. Her real name was Otha Middleton. She and Charley ran a furniture store over in Kellerton, so that tells you how long it has been. Aunt Otha was a great Sunday School teacher, and most of what I know about the scriptures, I learned from Aunt Otha. We met in the classroom over in the other church, and we were her kids. One of the story songs that I remember that she taught us was about the foolish man who built his house upon the sand and the wise man who built his house upon the rock; and that's the scripture I would like to use this morning. (Matthew 7:30-37)

"Verily I say unto you, it is not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, that shall enter unto the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven. For the day soon cometh, that men shall come before me to judgment, to be judged according to their works. And many will say unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name; and in thy name cast out devils; and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I say, Ye never knew me; depart from me ye that work iniquity.

"Therefore, whosoever heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, who built his house upon a rock, and the rains descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not; for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand; and the rains descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.

"And it came to pass when Jesus had ended these sayings with his disciples, the people were astonished at his doctrine; For he taught them as one having authority from God, and not as having authority from the Scribes."

Rodney Reveals His Week

I am very thankful to have this opportunity to be here today. It

is a good day, George, isn't it? Thank you for that testimony. Michael asked me this morning what my week has been like, and I said I didn't want to give away my sermon, so I didn't tell him; but Michael, here it goes. Last Sunday, somehow I found out that today was the day that I was speaking, and I tell you, when that happens to me, that puts me in a certain mode. First of all, it's panic. I think, "What can I possibly say to those people that I haven't already said to them before? What can I do; and how can I live a life good enough that God will bless me by helping me to say what I should say? It happens every time.

You know, last week we had a really good service. I presume most of you were here. I know Alan was. Alan talked about joy and about being joyful, and I was really inspired - really uplifted by that service. I went to school Monday thinking, "I am going to be joyful. They are going to see this joy in me today. And I was going, "Hey! How are you doing?" "We are having a good time. Aren't you glad to be here today?" I was smiling, and a teacher said, "What is wrong with you?" I said, "Nothing. Why?" She said, "Why are you smiling?" "I'm just happy today." All through the day she says, "You're still smiling!" She just couldn't believe that all through the day, I could keep doing that; but, you know, that was that way.

Tuesday, I get to school, and you know, I'm still smiling, but it's a little bit more of a challenge. I worked hard at it that day, and it was OK - no real problems. Wednesday, and I was kind of tired, you know. Kind of wasn't feeling real good and started having that sore scratchy throat that Debbie has been having, and I'm thinking, "I don't know! This isn't going to work out. I got out of speaking last time. I know Rob is not going to let me do this again. I have to think up something better than this!" I still wasn't feeling all that peppy, and I thought, Well, this is an early out day for the kids, and I am only going to have them until noon. It won't be any problem. I can go in there and be fired up and everything like that." I get to my first hour class, and tell them to do this or that, and they say, "Why are you such a grouchy pants today?" I'm thinking, "I wasn't!" and I said, "Shut up and get back to work!" I don't know why they thought that or why things were like that. You know, that day was just a zoo. We had kids going everywhere, and the kids didn't think they had to do anything, maybe I was a little grouchy that day.

Thursday, I knew I was coming down with something, so I took a couple of tylenol that morning and just kept thinking, "I just can't have it happen!" and I knew Thursday that I was a little irritable that day. I'll admit it. Thursday, I probably was a little bit of a grouch, but I resolved Friday that I knew I was going to do better. After all, it's Friday and here comes Saturday. you know, you have something to look forward to. So I started out and I was doing pretty good. I was positive. I was happy. I gave a quiz. Then I gave a test, and that always makes me happy, you know. Third hour, I just had one student. We had a good time talking. She told me all about a lot of things that she probably shouldn't have been telling me all about, and I was just kind of going Ummm! It was one of those hours! I was doing good. I gave another test fifth hour. Then sixth hour came and that's my seventh graders. Seventh graders are pretty lively, and I try to say lively with them. We have a good time in there. When I'm feeling good, I am usually on a roll. I say about any thing I can think of right off, and do different voices and things like that - just have a good time. There was one boy - I wasn't getting to him at all! He didn't have his work done, and he didn't care that he didn't have his work done. He didn't want any part of me. He just didn't want to be there. Back in my younger days, I would probably have done

something I can't tell you about here this morning. I would really have tried to put the fear of God in him, but I decided, "No. I'm not going to do that." I decided to take him to the office and let the principal deal with him. I went down the hall, looked back and no boy! So I had to go back and get him, and I say to myself, "That's not going to bother me. I'm going to stay in this good mood."

I went on through the hour. I said something to one girl and she got really upset with me. And I'm thinking, "She deserved it!" Then another one said something, and that time I knew that I was out of line. I really felt bad about that, and I apologized to her at the end of the hour. But, you know, things just weren't going right. Then the seventh hour came in and seventh hour class is a little different breed. We got to talking a little bit and they were upset with the principal for some reason, I don't know why - just mainly because he makes them follow the rules; and we had a little discussion about that. I said, "When you have kids, you will feel differently about it." They said, "When we have kids, we won't have any rules!" I'm thinking like, "Wait a minute! This can't work!" But they didn't believe that. A lot of students any more, they really think that you are a really mean guy if they don't let them have a party every day. If you give them homework, they don't like that. If you give them a test, they're not really crazy about that. They just really think they don't have to do anything. I suppose it is because when you teach in high school, they already know everything; and it's not until two or three years later that they realize how smart you really were.

It was kind of like that, and I was kind of bummed by that. Eighth hour, we got through that class all right and things were kind of going on Ok. After school, I helped a girl. She took a test, and then I checked it for her - teasing her a little bit about it. She needed a good grade so she would be eligible. I knew she had done pretty well, but I didn't let on that way. She was getting madder and madder as I was checking her, test thinking she had not done very well. So when I had finished, I told her what she had done, she felt better, but she had gotten upset with me because I had made her believe that she hadn't done so well. Another girl came in after school, upset because her grade is really low and asking what she can do pass to be eligible by Tuesday this week, and I said, "I don't see anything that you can do!" And so she wasn't real pleased either. I get home and we get ready to go to Mt. Ayr, and I get Debbie upset at me, and it wasn't really that hard. And I kept thinking, "I'm sure glad I am not speaking tonight! It would be very difficult for me to do that!" But, you know, it seemed like that day there were some things I did that upset people that were my fault; and I was wrong to do that. But there were some things that were really not my fault and I really hadn't intended for that to happen.

Then I get here Saturday and I decide I will go out and chore. Saturday is going to have to be a better day. You don't have school. It's got to be better. So, I get out there and Loren, who takes care of my cows, comes up- I had already fed the heifers. The first thing he says to me is, "Oh, by the way, you had one of your big, fancy, prize two year old heifers decide she should lay down in one of your feed bunks this week and kill herself!" And I was thinking, "That's not good. That really bums me out a little bit; but I've got to stay positive and keep thinking about tomorrow and what I want to say, and things like that."

I was getting ready to go to a sale down at Lamoni. I knew I was to meet Loren about twelve o'clock, and about ten to twelve, here comes a phone call. It's a tele marketer. Well, I don't know how most of you feel about tele marketers, but I try to picture myself in their shoes, so I try to be nice to them. He was telling me about this

and everything, and I am trying to be pleasant - you know, go along with him and everything, and “Yeah! That sounds like a good deal! No, I don’t think -.” First I said, “I don’t have the money for that.” That didn’t work. He said, “Well, you can pay later. I said, “Well, now, I just don’t think I am interested.” “What would you be interested in?” “Well, I don’t really think I am interested in anything that you have.” “Well, thanks a lot, fellow! You know you just wasted my time for the last fifteen minutes. Why didn’t you tell me early on that you didn’t want it?” And I’m going, Ei-ei-ei! I shouldn’t have been nice to this guy to begin with. I should have just hung up on him!” And I’m a thinking, “I don’t know!”

Our Hope For a Better Tomorrow

But you know I am here today, and I am here because God loves me, because He forgives me, and because He had given me a hope for a better tomorrow. God loves us all, and if we will turn to Him, He will forgive us, and we can renew our covenant with Him, and we can have that joy that Alan talked about last Sunday.

You know, I don’t know what tomorrow will bring. I know it’s going to be there, and I know pretty much what I am going to have to face, but we don’t know what waits for us tomorrow. But I believe if we can walk the walk, as Delbert used to say, God will be with us, and we can have that joy that He wants us to have. I believe God has given me the words to say today, and I believe His Spirit is with me. And I believe if He will do it for someone like me, He will do it for all of you. You just have to ask. If my words have any meaning for you today, and if you feel uplifted by the blessing of the Holy Spirit here this morning, I would ask that we might all praise Him and give Him the thanks and the glory for this experience.

I don’t know how you felt about - well, I think I do; but I know the service a couple of weeks ago when we had the blessing for Elyse was a very special service to me. I am pretty sure it was for all of you, too. I have thought about that service a lot and my first reaction - my first response to Debbie when we got out to the car was, “I have never seen a baby blessing like that before.” I had never seen us when we had just dedicated an entire service to the blessing of a baby, and I thought it was really good that we had done that. And I wondered, “Why haven’t I seen anything like that before?” What a special blessing that day was. hopefully not only for Elyse and her family but for all of us who were here and witnessed that morning. You know, I wondered, “Can you bless a child more than once? We could have that service every so often. Could we bless a child even if he is in his fifties?”

I remember when I was growing up, I don’t remember my baby blessing. It wasn’t written down or anything, and I was too young to remember it, but my Mom never let me forget it. And as I was growing up, she would constantly remind me of that blessing; for it said I would have a work to do someday. And I knew growing up that I would have to live my life so that I would fulfill that calling. And when I didn’t do what I knew I should be doing, remembering that blessing would help get me back on the right track, because Mom would remind me of God’s promise to me.

And we will need to remind Elyse from time to time, and each other, of that special blessing she had that day. We will need to remind her so that she will know God and so that she will be a part of His kingdom. We need to remind all of our little ones of the promises that God has for them - even those who are in their fifties. I believe this will help all of us stay on that right track.

This fall the father of two of my students passed away. I don’t know much about Jimmy. I know he was a single parent and was raising his two kids like himself. I don’t know what was wrong with

Mom. Jimmy was a real character. I knew that. I don’t know how best to describe him. He was just a unique individual. One thing I do remember about him the most is that you would go to a ball game and he would be nonstop yelling at the referees from the beginning until the end. He kind of overdid it, I guess is the best way to say it. In fact one year, and this was right after I was not the principal any longer, which I was thankful of, they had to ban him from going to any of the activities because he was just so obnoxious - I’m trying to be nice here! But he was that kind of a person. You know, he also said what he thought. He and I got along pretty good but if he didn’t get along with you, it wasn’t a very fun situation.

The morning that Jimmy passed away, our school went into a deep period of mourning. We had just as well have closed the school down because it was hard to accomplish anything. We had a session where the kids went to counseling. There were a lot of group hugs and a lot of prayers and tears that day, and it was just a really, really sad time. It was a very large funeral and they had it at the school. That was rather ironic for what he had done in the past. It was a sad time, and I still worry about his kids. They are basically on their own; but I couldn’t help but think, during that whole situation, will there be that many people upset when I die?

Counsel For Life

Looking through some of Mom’s stuff this week, I found a saying that said that you should live your life so that when you die, even the undertaker is sad. Now, think about that. You know, if you can live your life like that, you have lived a pretty good life, haven’t you? There’s a song that I am reminded of - Debbie likes it so well that she bought the CD, and I was surprised that she would like this song because it is kind of a country western song, and she’s not into that. All I used to hear about it was riding a bull named Fu Man Chu. It’s called, “Live Like You Were Dying.” I will just read you the words, because the first few times I heard it, all I heard was that one part, too, and there is a lot more to the song than just that one part. It goes like this:

“He said, I was in my forties with a lot of life before me, and a moment came that stopped me on a dime. I spent most of the next days looking at the X-Rays, talking about the options and talking about sweet times.

Actually, when it sank in that this might really be the end, how it hits you when you get that kind of news. The end of what you do.” And he says, “I went sky diving, I went Rocky Mountain climbing. I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fu Man Chu. And I loved deeper, and I spoke sweeter, and I gave forgiveness I’d been denying.” And he said, “Someday, I hope you get the chance to live like you were dying. “

He said, “I was finally the husband that most of the time I wasn’t. And I became a friend a friend would like to have. And all of a sudden, goin’ fishin’ wasn’t such an imposition, and I went three times the year I lost my dad.

“Well, I finally read the good book. And I took a good hard look at what I would do if I could do it all again.” Then it repeats the chorus, “I loved deeper, and I spoke sweeter, and I gave forgiveness I’d been denying.” And he said, “Someday, I hope you get the chance to live like you were dying. Like tomorrow was a gift, and you’ve got eternity to think about what you would do with it. “

What could you do with it? What can I do with it? What could I do with it? Sky diving? “I went Rocky Mountain climbing. I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fu Man Chu. And I loved deeper, and I spoke sweeter, and I watched an eagle as it was flyin’.” And he said, “Someday, I hope you get the chance to live like you were

dying.” You know, except for the bull riding part, and the sky diving, it’s pretty good advice, don’t you think?

It has been kind of a different fall for the teachers at Burlington Junction. Two of them she are about my age, one of them is Kay, who you know about, have had some heart trouble. Randy had to have a couple of stints put in. He had a balloon go through his heart, and things like that. It was a tough time for him, and Kay was sick all summer, I guess. She had a defibrillator put in her heart, so it would function like it was supposed to. She was out of school for several weeks. I got busy and hadn’t really talked to her much during the time that she was gone. When she got back, she really let me have it! She said, “I didn’t hear from you the whole time I was gone! Why didn’t you at least call?” I should have, you know, but I didn’t; but I will from now on.

You know, when I was growing up in high school - probably that’s when I first knew him - I had a friend. He was a church friend, too, by the name of Larry Rice. Larry was kind of unique, and I always thought he was kind of special because he was an uncle, and his niece was five or six years older than he. I thought that was kind of cool. He was the baby of the family and everyone else was a lot - lot older than Larry was. And so, we were pretty good friends. We went to Zion’s League together and Larry sometimes would call me down when I was driving too fast. He was just a pretty good guy.

Larry hasn’t had a really easy life. His dad died when he was very, very young, and so his Mom had to raise him and his older brother. They lived up here by Wishard Chapel on a farm. He had to do chores in the morning - milk cows and do things like that. I remember staying with him a few times. You had to be careful when you slept in his room, because, during the winter things would freeze in the room at night. You had to make sure you had plenty of quilts and stuff to pull over you; but that’s the way he grew up. He was always smiling, always laughing, you know - just a really good feeling. And he moved to Mt. Ayr - well, didn’t move but they brought the Tingley kids in and, of course, the Mt. Ayr kids - some of them - I wasn’t, but some of the Mt. Ayr kids weren’t always real nice to some of the Tingley kids, right Debbie? And Larry got kind of picked on a little bit, but he was always nice to everybody. When Larry and I graduated, he kind of went his way, and I went mine. He married, and that marriage - he had a family and was living over here at Lenox, and I forget what he was doing at the time, but they had a house fire; and he lost one of his children and another one was badly scarred. It affected his marriage. They split up and Larry kind of had to find his way again. He went back to school, which surprised me a little bit, became a teacher and things like that. Now he works, I think it’s for the veterans’ hospital up in Des Moines. I saw him last summer when we were in a class reunion. I hadn’t seen him in a long time and it was really neat seeing him again. He looks a lot older than I do, of course.

But over Thanksgiving we were talking to our sister-in-law, Betty. Betty lost her job and she got a new job at the Veterans Hospital. Now she works for Larry, which is really neat. We were talking about it, and she said, “Give me the dirt on Larry.” I’m thinking, “There’s nothing I can say! There’s nothing I can tell you that you can hold over him, because Larry is that kind of a guy. If everyone was as happy, as pleasant and as nice as Larry is, the world would be a lot better place.” You know, Larry has got his faults. I wish he still went to church and things like that, but I couldn’t tell her anything. I couldn’t tell her anything bad about Larry at all! I thought about that a lot, too; and you know, if someone who had known me growing up had been asked for the dirt on me, what all

could they tell them?

Sunday before Mom died, Jowett brought her out to the farm, which I was glad he did because I had been kind of neglecting Mom. I hadn’t had her out for a long time. In fact, the weekends before that, I hadn’t really spent a lot of time with her. It seemed like I was really busy. It seemed like I had a lot of important things to do. We had a really good day. She got to see the calves that we had weaned. She came in and watched a little TV. She was going to stay and watch the Cardinals play. Probably good that she didn’t. We took her back as we were getting ready to leave. She had wanted to watch a video tape that my nephew had sent of her and the kids, and I had said, “We will do that later.” I took her back over here to the home, and I said, “Mom, I’ll see you later.” You know, if I had known that I would not see her again alive, we would have watched that video tape, and I would have given her a hug, and I would have told her how much I loved her. But we don’t know those things.

Scriptures Instruct Us For This Day

The scriptures tell us this: (Matthew 24:41-49) “Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When its branches are yet tender, and it begins to put forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh at hand. So likewise mine elect, when they shall see all these things, they shall know that he is near, even at the doors. But of that day and hour no one knoweth; no, not the angels of God in heaven, but my Father only.

“But as it was in the days of Noah, so it shall be also at the coming of the Son of Man. For it shall be with them as it was in the days which were before the flood; for until the day that Noah entered into the ark, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, and knew not until the flood came and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be. Then shall be fulfilled that which is written, that, In the last days, Two shall be in the field; the one shall be taken and the other left. Two shall be grinding at the mill; the one taken and the other left. And what I say unto one, I say unto all men; Watch, therefore, for ye know not at what hour Lord doth come.”

We know we are in the Latter Days. We know our Lord will soon come. Will we have any regrets? What will people be able to say about us? Today is a good day. We don’t have to feel guilty. We don’t have to have any regrets. We can be forgiven because of the love of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. We can live our lives, not like we are dying, but like we are living for Christ to be with Him for eternity. Today, I would ask that we rededicate ourselves to that goal. I believe if we can do that, we will have joy. We will be happy!

The Gospel of Luke and a Restoration Testimony

Elder Gerald Bolingbroke brought the message on the second Sunday in December. He began by reading from Luke 1:1-4 and by reminding us that we’re approaching the season in which we celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. Many members of the congregation were taking part in a Christmas cantata which was to be presented that evening. The purpose of the cantata was to help us remember the “reason for the season.” The scriptures tell us of the story of Joseph, Mary, and of the birth of Jesus. Matthew and Luke both give a good description of the event. One of the most beloved accounts comes from the book of Luke. Brother Bolingbroke

told us about Luke.

He began by sharing with us that the scriptures really don't tell us much about Luke. There are some things about Luke that we can only guess, but we do know he was trained as a physician. We might wonder where Luke learned of the Gospel? Who baptized him? How did he become a friend of Paul?

Some scholars believe Luke was a Jew and an early convert. Other scholars think he was a Gentile, and they quote Colossians 4: 10-14. This passage seems to list the friends of Paul who were of the circumcision first and then it mentions Luke, along with others, as a friend. The probability is that those listed first were Jewish, and Paul was not included with them because he was a Gentile. Later in the sermon, Brother Bolingbroke told us some other clues which indicated that Luke was a Gentile.

Some people think Luke was one of the two men Jesus met on the way to Emmaus on the day of His Resurrection. Paul says he was a fellow laborer and also a beloved physician. Luke declares that his account is trustworthy and certain.

As author of the book of Acts, Luke is responsible for one quarter of the New Testament, even more than Paul, a prolific writer. We have no definite date of the writing of Luke, but between A.D. 50-60 seems reasonable because it naturally falls before the dating of the book of Acts which records no date after A.D. 62. Acts 1:1 refers to "the former treatise," so we can conclude the testimony of Luke predates Acts.

Luke's stories and sequence follow Mark with 55 percent of the material being common in both Mark and Luke. Luke uses 7,036 of the 8,485 words Mark uses. His words are not close to Matthew's, but there are no significant disagreements. Luke was as much an evangelist as portrayed in the other three gospels. His theology appears in Acts and with Pauline interpretation as well. The authorship of Luke is not revealed in the text. The author of Acts addresses the authorship of Luke with these words: "The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach."

Luke is mentioned by Paul in Philemon as a fellow worker. Philemon 1:19-24 states, "I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it; albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides. Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord; refresh my bowels in the Lord. Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say. But withal prepare me also a lodging; for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you. There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow laborers." It can be noted here that Lucas (or Loukas) is the Greek form of Luke. In Latin it is Lucius.

In 2 Timothy 4:11 we find Luke is with Paul. "Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee; for he is profitable to me for the ministry."

It is tradition that "the brother" mentioned in II Corinthians 8:18 is Luke. "And we have sent with him the brother, whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches:"

We find several places that mention "we" in Acts 16:10-17. In verse 13 we find "And on the Sabbath we went out of the city by a riverside." This is where they met Lydia, a seller of purple. In Acts 20:5-15, 21:1-18, and 27:1-29 we find more "we" sections, which indicate a close companion.

A strong tradition indicates Luke as the author of both Luke and Acts. In the second century an ancient extra textual prologue to the gospel says "Luke, a Syrian of Antioch, by profession a

physician, the disciple of the apostles, and later a follower of Paul until his martyrdom. He served the Lord without distraction, without a wife, and without children. He died at the age of 84 in Thebes, full of the Holy Spirit." This was confirmed by Origen, Eusebius, Jerome, Clement and others.

Tradition says Luke was from Antioch, which was the capital of Greek Syria. It is assumed by some that Luke was a Gentile Christian due to the superior quality of his Greek, his avoidance of Semitic (Jewish) words, the elimination of Jesus controversies with the law of the Pharisees, and the reference to Palestinian geography.

By studying Luke we recognize that he did not follow a chronological pattern, nor did he write a comprehensive study of the life of Jesus. He acknowledged that he chose certain events to illustrate the truth of the Gospel message, reminding and reinforcing Theophilus.

Then, as now, Greek existed in two literary forms; literary Greek and illiterate or popular Greek. Literary Greek was classic, but it is no longer used in every day life. Luke actually employed both styles. His knowledge and language skill was great and varied. He used common idioms and formal Latinisms. Luke's vocabulary is rich, using over 700 words which occur nowhere else in the New Testament.

Luke was not solely interested in recounting facts of the Gospel like a historian. His stated purpose was to give "assurance" or to defend against unfavorable reports at the time. Verses 1 to 4 of Chapter 1 says, "As I am a messenger of Jesus Christ, and knowing that many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us; Even as they delivered thus unto us, who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word; It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the first, to write unto thee, in order, most excellent Theophilus, That thou mightiest know the certainty to those things wherein thou hast been instructed." Luke wrote to assure Theophilus that the church in his day was teaching and practicing and was rooted in Jesus.

Theophilus means "friend of God". He was evidently of high rank because he was addressed as "most excellent. The name Theophilus was common to both Jews and Gentiles. Tradition from Clementine Recognitions (an ancient record) identified Theophilus as a great person in Antioch (Luke's home town) who became Bishop of Antioch and whose house was made into a church.

Even as Luke was writing, there were many other people who were recording events in the life of Jesus in an organized manner to make sure that valuable memories were not lost, as Luke says in the first verse. These writings certainly formed a part of the background of Luke's record. The other writers are not identified, but it can be reasoned that Mark was one source. Luke wrote in a time when men already were drifting into unbelief. Jude, who lived at the same time as Luke, wrote in Jude 1:3-5 "I . . . exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. I will therefore put you in remembrance, though ye once knew this, how the Lord, having saved the people out of the Land of Egypt afterward destroyed them that believed not." Today we find ourselves in the same situation, so Luke becomes an Apostle of the Restoration.

The Inspired Version of the Bible makes changes, some of

which are significant. For example, when we look at the first verse in Luke in the Inspired Version it says, “knowing that many have taken in hand...” is a more precise application than the King James which says “Forasmuch as many”. “Taken in hand” would suggest “have undertaken”.

Luke does make reference to the Twelve as a group and to individuals in that group. However, it is evident that he recognized that the Spirit worked through a church organization. Acts 15:28 states, “For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and us.” It is apparent that Luke was prompted by the Spirit to write to Theophilus in this manner.

If you would like to learn more about Luke read the book “Certainty of Those Things” by Norman Anne Holik where I have learned about the things I am presenting to you this day.

Brother Bolingbroke went on to tell the story of “Miracles in Mexico” by Charles Sperry. As we have just seen, Luke strongly supported the gospel in a time when it was being attacked. Similar events are occurring today as well. This story by Charles Sperry is a strong support of the Restoration Gospel.

Charles had always wanted to fly a plane. One day he had the opportunity to buy an old, wrecked plane. He had the pleasure of working on it, making it new again, even though he had had no experience with planes before.

After the FAA approved the structure of the plane, Charles started taking flying lessons. He was flying his own plane in a few weeks. It was important to Charles to have a purpose for the plane, so he dedicated it to the Lord.

Soon a friend of his asked him if he would be interested in flying with a large group of radio ministers. These men had been supporting Indian missions and tribal people in the Mexican mountains, south of Mexico City. These radio ministers flew commercially to Mexico City each year. They had small planes like Charles’ which they would fly into the mountains to check on the children’s orphanages. They would bring the Indians out of the hills, and teach them how to speak, read, and write in Spanish. They also taught them a trade like woodworking, welding, or mechanics. Then they would convert them to Jesus Christ, because of their strong desire to help their fellow men. Charles believed God wanted to reward the efforts of these men and to teach them more about His true gospel.

Charles said that in a way you would never believe, the Lord opened the doors for him to share with the radio ministers about our church.

On the second day, someone called out at the dinner table, “Charlie, I hear that you are a Mormon.”

Silently, Charles pleaded with God, “Tell me what to say, Lord.”

The Lord put words in his mouth in a most beautiful way. He explained to them that God spoke to his prophets in the Old Testament, and also in the New Testament. God also spoke to His prophet, Lehi, in Jerusalem and told him he should leave the city because the Babylonians were going to destroy Jerusalem. The prophet was to take his family and genealogy, or records, and go into another land. After they had traveled for some time, they came to a body of water. Here God told them how to build a ship.

They crossed the ocean and started a new nation on this continent. Remember in Isaiah it says, “Other sheep I have which are not of this fold.” After Christ was crucified in Jerusalem, He came to this continent and ministered to the people here and healed their sick. Christ promised He would return to the people in

America. We know this because when Cortes came, the Indians thought he was Christ, who had returned to them.

After several hours of telling the radio ministers about the Book of Mormon, the minister in charge of tribal ministries spoke to Charles. He spoke loud enough so that everyone present could hear. “Listen, Brethren, Charlie has something in this Book of Mormon. I’m going to read it.”

This statement closed the meeting. But, even though the ministers were amazed by what Charles had told them, the Lord knew that deep down in their hearts there was some unbelief. So God began to prepare a special treat for them-- one they would never forget.

One of the orphanages that they visited, was situated in a very remote area in the mountains south of Mexico City. The four planes had just picked up about twenty ministers there, and they were flying the last flight of the day back to the hotel in Cuernavaca. As they climbed out of the valley and ascended into the mountains, there was a huge storm facing them that filled the whole sky.

The other pilots called Charles on a radio and said, “We’re going to have to go back or we’re going to have to find a way around the storm.” They soon discovered there was no way around the storm, because it covered too wide an area. Also, there was no place to stay in Tiapa, because the place was too primitive. Again Charles looked back at the storm. Suddenly he saw an opening--like a tunnel. At the end of the tunnel, there was a bright light. He began to realize that he was looking through the storm, and he was seeing the sun shining behind the storm. What was so unbelievable was that none of the other pilots could see this tunnel.

Charles radioed the other pilots that he could see a path through the storm and that he was going to follow the path to the light that he could see in the distance. Trustingly, the other pilots flew behind Charles. The wall of clouds was as high as they could see, and yet they also touched the ground. As they entered the tunnel, they flew through the most beautiful rainbow. The tunnel was about a half mile wide. The rain became so thick and strong on both sides of the tunnel-- so gray and black, you could not penetrate it with your eyes. It was just like two angry walls, black water pouring down on each side of them. Above their planes was a rippled ceiling.

There was not one bit of rain on their planes, and absolutely no turbulence anywhere in the tunnel. The trip through the tunnel was as smooth as silk. They flew for about 85 miles in the tunnel, which took them about 35 minutes of time. As they left the tunnel, they could see Monument Valley just ahead of them. The sun was shining brightly all about them. They landed in the valley and tied up their airplanes.

As they were driving out of the airport in their cars, it started raining again. It continued raining for three days, which was unusual for that arid country. God was going to use the rain as a means through which the people there could learn of his true gospel. Some of the fellows there exclaimed, “When the children came out of Egypt and walked through the Red Sea, they had nothing on us.” Everyone was talking about the miracle tunnel that God had created for them so that they might return to their hotel. Many of the people there had not believed in miracles nor modern revelation.

Since it was so dreary and rainy the next day, the radio minister who was in charge came up to Charles and the other ministers there and said, “Charlie, I’d like to know more about your church.”

Charles told the minister, “In our church which is the Church of Jesus Christ, there are miracles today, as there were in days of old.” Tears ran down the minister’s cheeks, and he just cried and

cried.

He just kept saying, "It's a miracle! It's a miracle." Then the minister in charge asked, "What does your church believe about baptism?"

Charles told them that Christ showed us the way and was an example, so the people of the Church of Jesus Christ believe in immersion. Christ went to John the Baptist and said, "I must be baptized of you to fulfill all righteousness." Charles talked to the ministers for several hours on baptism.

It seemed to have made quite an impression on the minister in charge. The next year when Charles returned to Mexico, the same minister showed a video where he was baptizing a young Indian and was saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Charles realized then that the minister was now patterning his baptisms after the knowledge he had gained from reading the Book of Mormon.

On the second day of rain. The minister in charge asked Charles, "What is your belief on the gathering of the House of Israel?"

Charles explained that in the Bible, it tells how the twelve tribes will be gathered back in. That out of Zion would go forth the law and out of Jerusalem would go forth the word of Lord. All those people left in Zion and Jerusalem will be called holy. Those who would not take up their sword against their neighbor, would have to flee to Zion. The radio ministers accepted everything Charles said, because of the very beautiful Holy Spirit that was present.

Then Charles asked them. "Would you believe that the New Jerusalem will be in the land of Missouri?" The radio ministers all agreed, "Oh, yes, that would be true."

On the third day, God again caused it to rain. It was probably the most beautiful day of all. They asked Charles about his interpretation of the 15th chapter of Corinthians. He spent several hours telling them about the glories of the sun, the moon, and the stars.

On the following day, the rain stopped, and they were able to fly. During the rest of his stay in Mexico, people came up to him, asking questions about his church. For many months after he returned to Missouri, he got calls from California, Texas, Arkansas, and Florida, from people wanting to know more about the fascinating Book of Mormon.

Because God endowed his mind with words and ideas, his message came across so very beautifully. His wonderful, loving spirit was present each day. He had dedicated his airplane and his life to the service of God.

Brother Bolingbroke closed his message by expressing his wish that all of the saints would remain true to the Restoration gospel throughout their lives.

Lessons From the Manger

Our Pastor, High Priest Robert Rolfe first greeted the congregation with the announcement that he and Lynda will be in Colorado with their daughters next week and not be with us to celebrate Christmas day; but, he added, "Nevertheless, we think of you as much as our own family as we do our own children."

Next he announced that he was going to read a scripture from the seventh chapter of Isaiah, and warned us that he might have difficulty with this sermon. "You know, the shortest verse in the

Bible is 'Jesus Wept!' Well, I've got a problem. Some of my gaskets are old and they leak. So if I start leaking (weeping), you'll know I'm just following my Master in doing that."

This particular scripture has to do with a bad fellow named Ahaz. Ahaz was pretty wicked, and the Lord said to him, "Ask me a sign." He said, "I'm not falling for that! If I ask for a sign, I'm tempting God, and I know what's going to happen." And God says, "You're wearing me out!" That was kind of what the answer was, so let me just read it, and you'll see. I wanted to give you the context of where this comes from because most of the time we don't hear the context.

"Moreover the Lord spake again unto Ahaz, saying, Ask thee a sign of the Lord thy God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord. And he said, Hear ye now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel"

This is Christmas season, and this year, the best gift you can give your children is an IPOD. That's what I heard on TV this week. If you want to put something else in there, go ahead. Do you know what an IPOD? If you are a computer person, you might know what it is. And if you don't give them one of those, very likely you are not a good parent and therefore must feel guilty that you did not give them one of those particular gifts. At least that's what the advertiser would have us believe on lots of these things that all the good parents are trying to give their children!

We are celebrating a gift this Christmas, and that's one from our heavenly Father. I don't need to tell you this, I hope that's our Savior, Jesus Christ. I might ask you this, though. "Have you received the gift?" "What does it profit a man if a gift is bestowed upon him, and he receive not the gift?" (Doctrine and Covenants 85:7.)

I have some lessons I am going to be talking about, lessons from the manger. I would like you to think about them in terms of your life. Let's start out by asking, "How is this gift of Jesus Christ introduced to us in the Gospel?" Both Matthew and Luke call Jesus "The Virgin born Savior", "The Lord Jesus Christ", "The Holy One", "The Son of the Most High", "The Son of God.", "Immanuel". I would like to just talk about Him coming. Most of us, when we think about Christmas, think of the baby in the manger. We sang a song last week, "Come and see the baby". Don't we all want to go and see the newborn baby? Wherever they are, they are fun to look at. I'm one of those fathers that has actually seen children born and was able to stand up the whole time. I remember when Alana was born, the doctor popped her in my arms. I looked at her kind of funny, and he said, "Her color will change in a minute!" I was looking at her. She looked awfully gray-black to me. I didn't remember that until the blood starts oxidizing, you don't see any pink color. That happened right in front of my eyes. It was almost like "pop", and her skin turned pink!

We think of this as a happy time. Jesus is coming. He is born and this is a good time for all, except maybe for Mary who had to ride the donkey seventy miles when she was ready to deliver and then giving birth in a stable. I talked to Glen Friend here this week end, and he had an experience in which he was talking to the Lord about the crucifixion. He was thinking about this terrible scourging and what the pain would be to go through the crucifixion, have nails in you and all this. He was talking to the Lord about how hard it must have been to go through all that. He believes that he had an

experience in which the Lord told him that the hardest thing He did was to be born in Bethlehem!

Jesus Came In the Flesh

Now, you might think about that for a minute! That's the first lesson, according to the Gospels, that we have God coming in the flesh! How many of you have been wherever it is - the mountains, the beach, someplace that is just so beautiful that you say, "I don't want to leave here. I would like to just stay here. This is so nice!" We have all had these experiences. Maybe it was even here in Iowa! You might think about who this was and where He was coming from. Does Jesus Christ love God the Father? Does the Father love the Son? All He had to do was leave wherever God lives and the hosts of Heaven, the Creator of the Universe and come down and put Himself into this little baby and go through that whole experience of being born, then living as a baby, doing all the things that babies do and growing up with Joseph and Mary. According to the experience Glen had, He said that was the hardest thing that He had to do. That's quite an insight because it comes from God's viewpoint. From our viewpoint as men, we would say the hardest thing would be to go and be crucified. But if you look at it from God's point of view, He's coming from being the Creator of the Universe to becoming a man and subjecting himself to all that being a man means.

And I might point out to you in Third Nephi 1:12 - Rick and Bess read part of that to you this morning, but they didn't read this part of this account. This particular chapter is where all the believers in Christ are ready to be destroyed. This is the context. This is the night that if the sign that Samuel the Prophet had testified about didn't come, they were all toast! So Nephi, as you might guess, was praying pretty hard. You know, if you thought this could be your last day on earth, you might be a little more serious about your prayers. So this is what it says here: "And it came to pass that he cried mightily unto the Lord, all that day; and behold, the voice of the Lord came unto him, saying, Lift up your head and be of good cheer, for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, And on the morrow come I into the world, to shew unto the world that I will fulfill all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets."

So even right before His birth, Jesus Himself is testifying to Nephi that He's coming into the world the next day. Now I grant you that it's pretty hard for us to imagine a man being a God. I have jokingly said that I have the body of a god - and some of you will say outright, "It's Buddha!" That's the body I have now. It used to be Hercules but it has changed; but in this case, Jesus was God! Even in that baby, He was still God and also a man. It's really hard for us to understand that. That is a difficult thing for us to conceive of; and the only way this could happen would be for Him to be born of a virgin. Otherwise He would be just like a man like all the rest of us. And so I would like to ask you this morning, "Do you believe that it really happened - that Jesus was born to a virgin?" What do we know about this? How many experiences have you had where you have learned of virgin births. I don't know of any, and most of the time we say, "Yeah! Right!" That would be the reaction. So, in any case, how can that be? This was what Mary asked the angel when he said this was going to happen. What was the answer? "With God, nothing is impossible." We won't know really how that happened, but we have to believe in faith, I think, that it did happen just as the scripture claims that it did.

You know, there are some Old Testament prophecies that have been fulfilled. We already know of these. There is a promise to

make a great nation out of Abraham, a promise that Sarah would birth Isaac, a promise that Solomon would build the temple, and there are many, many others. What would the Bible mean to us if God had given all of those promises but failed to keep them? We probably wouldn't have the Bible on our shelves. We would say, "What a useless book! God is making promises and we can't rely on them!" I think our faith would be meaningless. The word of God as we interpret it would be unreliable. I feel like the virgin birth is one of those things that if you don't rely on what the scripture says, the whole house comes tumbling down. It is essential to the faith in Jesus Christ that the virgin birth was not just a principle, but that it actually occurred.

Many of the theologians that I have read think that the virgin birth is just one of those doctrines about which we can make up our own mind; and they have lots of those in there that way. They think you can just make up your own mind whether the virgin birth happened, and they say we don't have to believe that to be a Christian. Do you think that it doesn't matter whether you believe that a virgin birth occurred to be a Christian?

Those people who have that view look at the Gospel like a smorgasbord. Lynda and I have tried not to go to those restaurants because we have found that we do not have the won't power to quit loading up, What we really need is to have them give us a six inch plate, and then we might have some relief. But usually they have 12 or 14 inch plates and the temptation is it's all you can eat, so you just keep piling it on. In terms of the smorgasbord, it's the same way in terms of the theologians. You look at all the scriptures say and you say, "I believe this one. I don't believe this one. I believe this one. I don't believe this one", and you just throw out the ones that you don't believe. Well, if that's the case, then Jesus was just a good teacher. He had a lot of interesting things to say, but He wasn't any different than us.

It Was a Virgin Birth

So lesson two is - and you might think about that a little bit - that if He was born of a virgin, what does that do to the theologian's point of view? Do I have to accept Him as the Son of God, if that's the case? Because that's impossible - or at least we would think it was impossible for a child to be born without a father, and if that happened, then the virgin birth is as the Gospel testifies it to be. I found a poll. They ran a poll of 7441 Protestant ministers and asked them all this question about whether they believed in the virgin birth. How do you think the ministers did? I'm not picking on anybody. This is just what the poll said: Lutherans, 19 percent of their ministers believed in the virgin birth; American Baptists, 34 percent, Episcopalians, 44 %, Presbyterians, 49 %, Methodists, 60%. At least for the Methodists, over half of them believed in the virgin birth, or at least said they did in the poll.

Harris poll polled 1011 adults. You understand how these polls are supposed to work. They do them randomly and whatever they come up with is supposed to give a cross section of adults in the United States and tell you what we are thinking. They randomly selected adults that were not clergy, and 91% of them believed in the virgin birth. Now you might ask yourself, "How could the Pastors of all these congregations not believe in the virgin birth, but for the most part all of their parishioners believe in it?" It's a kind of a strange thing, isn't it, that the ones who are teaching the faith are the ones who don't believe. All I can say is that Isaiah 7, and we have read that, says a virgin shall conceive, which in terms of how we look at things, is impossible! So what was the angel's message to Mary? "With God, nothing is impossible!"

We have been very familiar with the story in chapter two of Luke. As we read that, we think of Luke as the Christmas story. For something different today, I would like us to look at Joseph's account of what occurred, and that's in Matthew two. Luke two was Mary's account. Matthew two is Joseph's account. It's really short. I will just read the chapter:

"Now, as it is written, the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise. After his mother, Mary, was espoused to Joseph, before they came together she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph, her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a vision, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife; for that which is conceived in her, is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins. Now this took place, that all things might be fulfilled, which were spoken of the Lord, by the prophets, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, (which, being interpreted, is, God with us.)

Then Joseph, awaking out of his vision, did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife; And knew her not until she had brought forth her first-born son; and they called his name Jesus." Now, there's a lot in that story.

I marry a lot of people. that's one of the things I do as magistrate. I don't know how many. Sometimes I marry as many as three couples a day. Lynda has said we need to put a chapel in my office. Maybe we should build one outside where we could have the smallest church in the world, or something. Well, anyway, they didn't do things the same in that day as we do. Under the law, they were betrothed. We would say they were engaged. This was much more than that. This was a contract, and if you break the contract, you are in big trouble under their system. Once this contract was entered into there was a period of time between the signing of the agreement and the marriage. It was during that period of time that Mary turns up pregnant. What would you do, then, men, if that happened to you - that you have an engagement and your wife to be comes to you and says, "I'm pregnant!"? Or she doesn't have to. It's obvious! Sometimes you can tell. After awhile they don't have to say anything. What would you do? Joseph isn't any different than the rest of us.

Well, he had, he thought, two possible actions. One of those was to make a public example of Mary. What that means is, under the Deuteronomy 22, you took her outside of town and stoned her to death. That was one choice, and it said he didn't want to do that. Well, if you really cared about her despite what she, quote, unquote, had done to you, you might think that is pretty severe. Or he could divorce her under Deuteronomy 24. That's what he is talking about when he says "putting her away." That's another phrase for getting a divorce. Whenever you see that in the scriptures, putting away your wife, that's getting a divorce. Well, lesson number three is that the Lord supplied Joseph with an explanation and gave him a third option.

Lesson Number Three - The Lord Gives "Third Options"

What's the third option? Marry the girl! I might point out to you. Joseph and Mary both got the same information. Didn't they? The angel came to Mary and gave her information. The angel came to Joseph and gave him the same information. It's interesting to me - I went back and looked at this to be sure - I don't find anything in the text that says that Mary told him how she got pregnant. Maybe

she did. You can believe that either way, but anyhow she was, and apparently, if you read the Gospels, that was public knowledge that she was. And so, perhaps Mary thought, "Nothing's impossible with God. If Joseph doesn't believe that, I guess that's God's problem, and God will take care of it." That may have been the approach she took to the whole thing. In any case, the scripture says that Joseph did as the angel of the Lord told him. And Mary said, "Be it according to your word!"

I would like to point out something to you in terms of this, Joseph went to bed with one decision on his mind - a decision to do one thing on his mind, and woke up with a different answer. Have you ever done that - gone to bed thinking you are going to do something a certain way and something changes your mind in the meantime? Well, if you go to bed and have a decision and you pray to the Lord about what you should be doing, sometimes God's decision is just the opposite from what your decision was, and if you listen to him, you may wake up and say, "Hey! I'm going to do this differently!"

So Joseph marries the girl. He accepts her as his wife. But then he has another thing that's another lesson here, and that is, this isn't just accepting her as his wife if he believes the angel message, is it? He is accepting that this child is the Son of God! There has been a joke that all Jewish women think that their sons are sons of God; but in this particular case, he was the Son of God. And I have a feeling that he wasn't the easiest kid to raise, despite what you might think about it. Do you know why? Have you ever run across these kids that are so precocious that they are away ahead of you all of the time? You just can't keep up with them. I have a feeling he was that way. That's why when he was twelve years old he spent three days in the temple talking to the High Priests, and they are all amazed at how much He knows. And the parents say, "How come you did this to us?" You know they go a day out there traveling and have to go back. I don't know how happy I would be if I had to drive back a whole day to pick up one of my kids who was doing what he wasn't supposed to be doing. In any case, they accepted him. I think Joseph accepted Him as the Son of God. I think he had to. Remember now, both Joseph and Mary are descendants of who? David. And so he is in line by lineage to be king of Israel, an heir to the throne of David.

So, in any case, we get to the part of the story which we usually see at Christmas time, and that is they have arrived in town and are looking for a room. Have you ever had that experience where you are traveling and you can't find room? Why, I have. The last time we were coming from Michigan, we left western Michigan, up in the upper peninsula, drove through Wisconsin, drove through Minnesota, finally at one thirty in the morning we stopped at a rest area in Minneapolis. There were no rooms in all that place - no camp grounds, no motels, no nothing, and I could understand a little bit of what it might be like. Think how tired you would get if you are looking for a room and you can't get one. The best place they could find was a stable, and while we may romanticize that, I have a feeling that stable was not a place that any of us would want to stay in. But it might be better than nothing if you wanted to get out of the night air and have a place to hole up.

So we have one more child in a teeming mass of humanity that is born under those circumstances. I might ask you, "Who would notice that that had occurred?" Probably most of the people there, other than Joseph and Mary, didn't pay any attention. It was just another child born on another night.

I would like to read you a short story. This is called, "Trouble at the Inn." "For years now whenever Christmas pageants are talked

about in a certain little town in the midwest, someone is sure to mention the name of Wallace Pearling. Wally's performance in one annual production of the nativity play has slipped into the realm of legend. But the old timers who were in the audience that night, never tire of recalling exactly what happened. (That's because old timers, and I am beginning to get into that category, start to repeat ourselves often saying, "Have I ever told you?" "Yeah, you have!") "Wally was nine that year and in the second grade though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy - slow in movement and in mind. Still Wally was liked by the other children in his class, all of whom were smaller than he, though the boys had trouble hiding their irritation when Wally would ask to play ball with them or any game, for that matter, in which winning was important. Most often they would find a way to keep him out. Wally would hang around anyway - not sulking - just hoping. He was always the helpful boy - a willing and smiling one, and the natural protector, paradoxically, of the underdog. Sometimes if the older boys chased the younger ones away, it would always be Wally who would say, 'Can't they stay? They would be no bother.'

"Wally fancied the idea of being a shepherd with the flute in the Christmas pageant that year, but the play's director, Miss Lombard, assigned him a more important role. After all, she reasoned, the inn keeper didn't have too many lines and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Mary more forceful.

"And so it happened that the usual large partisan audience (We used to do this. Remember that, you old timers, how we used to recite and say poems, and sing songs and so forth?) gathered for the town's yearly extravaganza of crooks and crutches, of beards and crowns, halos and a whole stage full of squeaky voices. No one on stage or off was more caught up in the magic of the night than was Wallace Pearling. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performances with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lombard had to make sure he didn't wander on stage before his cue.

"Then the time came when Joseph appeared slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door set into the painted back drop. Wally, the innkeeper, was there waiting. 'What do you want?' Wally said swinging the door open with a brusque gesture. 'We seek lodging.' 'Seek it elsewhere!' Wally looked straight ahead but spoke vigorously. 'The inn is filled!'

"Sir, we have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and are very weary.' 'There is no room in this inn for you!' Wally looked properly stern! 'Please, good innkeeper. This is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you have some small corner for her. She is so tired.'

"Now, for the first time, the innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance and looked down at Mary. With that there was a long pause - long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment. 'No! Be gone!' whispered the prompter from the wings. 'No!' Wally repeated automatically. 'Be gone!' Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary and Mary laid her head upon her husband's shoulder, and the two of them started to move away.

"The innkeeper did not return inside his inn, however. Wally stood there in the doorway watching the forlorn couple. His mouth was open, his brow creased with concern, his eyes filling unmistakably with tears. And suddenly this Christmas pageant became different from all others. 'Don't go, Joseph', Wally cried out. 'Bring Mary back!' And Wallace Pearling's face grew into a bright

smile, as he says. 'You can have my room!'

"Some people in the town thought that the pageant had been ruined. Yet there were others, many, many others, who considered it the most Christmasy of all the Christmas pageants they had ever seen."

I think that is a beautiful story. I think it has to do with what Christmas is all about, and perhaps Wallace Pearling, even though we would say that he was one of those special students, seemed to sense more of what Christmas was about than all of the others.

Who would notice a baby being born under those circumstances? I might ask you, "Why did God choose such a way for His Son to come into the earth? Why didn't He come in a big ship, sail two hundred feet above the ground and make His announcement saying, 'I'm here! I'm here to solve all of your problems. I'm here to heal the sick and give you all salvation.'" Why was He born a baby instead of coming in a way that was so heralded or by some other big display of power?

Jesus Had to Become a Man to Redeem Men

You know, according to the Book of Hebrews, and this is another lesson - Jesus had to become a man to redeem men. The virgin birth was a vital part of God's plan of redemption. Without the virgin birth, He was just another man. He would have been born in sin and lived in sin all of His life. But the scriptures say that Jesus was born without sin and that He knew no sin during His life. He is both the Son of God and God, the Son!

Reason, we talked about this in class, cold logic says that's impossible, but the scriptures say it had to be. It was necessary for us to be redeemed by our Savior. So Mary had the child in a stable and laid Him in a manger. You know, here's another lesson. The word manger is a French word. I don't know whether you have thought about this. So much of what God does is full of symbolism to help us understand what He is doing; and the word in French means to be fed. Did Jesus come into the world to be fed? He was born to be fed. Later on in His life, He said, "I am the bread of life. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever." (John 6:51). That helpless baby that laid in that cattle trough was to be fed to the world - to be given as a ransom - His life for our life!

You know, the Psalmist David asked that question. "None can by any means redeem his brother; nor give to God a ransom for him that he should still live forever... ." (Psalm 49:7-8). But Jesus did that! As He laid in that manger, He was showing the world that He came to be fed!

Generally in our schools across the country, our government has been doing a good job of eliminating the message that God became a man and was born in a stable to be fed, and it's my belief that the morals and ethics of our children have been suffering ever since. And I think it is rather ironic that in Russia, the Communists have recognized that their society is destroying itself because of the lack of ethics and morals; and so for the past ten years they have implemented a program to teach morals and ethics to their children. Do you know how they're doing that? They are importing Bibles, putting them in the schools and having people come to teach the kids what those lessons are. Isn't that strange that the Communists are teaching the Bible in the schools and the Christians are booting the Bibles out of the schools?

Well, I've got another little story. This is supposed to be a true story about two Americans who answered that call to come to Russia and teach morals and ethics to the children. They are invited to teach at prisons, businesses, orphanages, fire and police departments, etc. And so they went to this orphanage where there are about

a hundred boys and girls who have been abandoned, abused and left in the care of the government. Here is the story that they told about their experience:

“It was nearing the holiday season, 1994 - time for our orphans to hear for the first time the traditional story of Christmas. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room, in the inn, the couple went to a stable where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger.

“Throughout the story, the children in the orphanage sat in amazement as they listened, Remember, for these folks, this is the first time they ever heard this message. Some sat on the edge of their stools trying to grasp every word. Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city. (Now for you teachers, these are object lessons, right? You give them these things and they learn it by reinforcement, doing it again.)

“The orphans were busy assembling their manger. They tore up their paper and laid strips in the straw, and small squares of flannel from a worn out nightgown an American lady was throwing away for the baby blanket, and a doll like baby was cut from a piece of felt. All went well until I got to one table where little Mishna sat. He looked to be about six years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy’s manger, I was startled to see, not one but two - two babies in the manger. I wanted to say, “Where did he get this?” Quickly I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy who had only heard the story once, he related the happenings accurately until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Mishna started to ad lib. He made up his own ending to the story. (If you have taught children, sometimes they do that.) And this is what he said:

““And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mama and I have no papa, and I don’t have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with Him, but I told Him I couldn’t because I didn’t have a gift to give Him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, I thought about what I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept Him warm, would that be a good enough gift? And Jesus told me, ‘If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me!’ So I got into the manger and Jesus looked at me and told me I could stay with Him forever!

“Now, as little Mishna finished his story, his eyes brim full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks, putting his hand over his little face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him - someone who would stay with him for always!”

Lesson Number Six - What Gift Do You Bring

What about the Americans who had come to teach a lesson to these children? They had learned the lesson they had come there to teach. And that’s the lesson that I would like you to think of this morning as you look at this manger - that it is not what you have in your life but who you have in your life that really counts.

We all should give thanks for the people that keep us warm in life, and for all of God’s many blessings to us - freedom from want, life, love, togetherness, and for the enduring love of Jesus Christ - the one person who keeps us warm and safe for always. God has

given us the best gift ever this Christmas season. We are now looking into the manger. There lies the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Are we like little Mishna - we don’t have any gift for Him? Lesson six is, What gift do you bring to the King in the manger?

Live Out - Don’t Just Act Out - The Christmas Story

“He was born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the same word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John bear witness of him, and cried, saying, This is he of whom I spake; He who cometh after me, is preferred before me; for he was before me. For in the beginning was the Word, even the Son, who is made flesh, and sent unto us by the will of the Father. And as many as believe on his name shall receive of his fullness. And of his fullness have all we received, even immortality and eternal life, through his grace.” (John 1:13-16)

Nathan Smith, returning home for Christmas, was our speaker the day after Christmas. After reading the scripture concerning the birth of Jesus Christ, he began by recalling recent conversations with friends for whom their most cherished Christmas remembrance from childhood was acting out the Christmas story as a family. “Some of them have quite elaborate traditions including wearing costumes and using all the front room - living room space with all of their cousins acting out the Christmas story. Somewhere I know there is a video tape of the Loving cousins dressed up in bathrobes and towel turbans acting out the Christmas story. Certainly at church I have been involved in Christmas pageants through the years. And every year at South Chrysler, where I attend now, they have a very big Christmas program where all of the children dress up and get to take part in the Christmas story.

I think it is such a nice tradition and such a worthwhile thing to do, because if you are playing a part in the Christmas story, you really can put yourself in the shoes of the person you are playing in a way that just reading the story maybe you don’t. If you actually go ahead, put on some kind of a costume and stand in that place, you can really imagine yourself in the story and in the shoes of the people who lived it out in real life. I hope for the young people that, if you haven’t been in a Christmas play, you will have a chance to do that, if not this year, perhaps another year. And I hope that this sermon today will be put in a way that you will be able to understand and relate to it, even if you are one of the youngest people here.

Even though the Christmas Day has passed, the Christmas story is always important to us. God is the author of history. Things don’t just happen in history in a random way, but they happen because God is explaining things to us. So as we look at the story and look back on it, we can understand God’s message for us; and even though we may not act out the story again until next year, I hope we can live out the story of Christmas from now and throughout the coming year.

Scripture Records Many Miraculous Births

Often we start reading the story of Christmas in chapter two of the Gospel of Luke, but it actually begins before that. Luke gives us more of the background in chapter one with the story of two people,

Zacharias and Elizabeth. He says that they were righteous people who “walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless”. So they were very good people. They always tried to do everything right. Zacharias was a Priest and Elizabeth was also from that lineage of being with the priesthood; but Zacharias and Elizabeth had no children, and the scriptures say that they were “well stricken in years”. That means they were pretty old. They were past the age when most people would be able to have children. While Zacharias was serving in the temple - he was burning incense - the angel Gabriel appeared to him, and it was very magnificent. It must have been because “Zacharias was troubled and fear fell upon him; but Gabriel said unto Zacharias, Fear not!” And he told him that he would have a son who would be named John, who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

Zacharias was very surprised, and it was a little bit hard for him to believe that because he and Elizabeth were so old. And he said, “Whereby shall I know this, for I am an old man, and my wife is well stricken in years.” And Gabriel answered, “I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God and am sent to speak unto thee and show thee these glad tidings.” It seems like Gabriel is saying, “What more do you want? An angel appeared to tell you. What more evidence do you need of what is going to happen?” But Gabriel gave him another sign. He said, “You won’t be able to speak again until the things that I prophesied come to pass.”

And that was just what happened! When Zacharias left the temple, he couldn’t talk to anybody. He couldn’t say anything, because that was what Gabriel had given him for a sign so he would know that what he had said was true. And just as Gabriel had said, Zacharias finished serving at the temple, he went home and his wife Elizabeth became pregnant, and she praised God for that miracle. Everybody knew that it was a real miracle because Zacharias and Elizabeth were so old. Their baby was born, and after he was eight days old, he was brought to the temple for circumcision, and that was when he would get his name. The people in the family thought that he should be named Zacharias after his father because he was probably the only son which they would ever have, and they thought he should carry on his father’s name, but Elizabeth said, “Not so! He shall be called John!”

The family thought they should ask Zacharias about that for sure; so they asked Zacharias if he thought that was OK. Zacharias still couldn’t talk but he wrote out a message, and it said, “His name is John!” As soon as he did that, Zacharias could speak again, and the very first words that came out of his mouth after at least nine months of not being able to talk were to praise God. And then he gave a prophecy. He prophesied about Jesus and he prophesied about John. About John he said, “Thou child, shalt be called the prophet of the highest, for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His way, to give knowledge of salvation unto His people by baptism for the remission of their sins whereby the dayspring from on high has visited us to give light to them who sit in darkness and the shadow of death - to guide our feet in the way of peace.” (Luke 1:75-78).

Have Faith To Believe in Miracles

So if we want to live out the Christmas story - not just act it out once a year - but if you want to really live the Christmas story in the coming year, how can we live like Zacharias and Elizabeth? I think the important thing that we can do is that we can believe - believe in God’s promises and not doubt. Zacharias had some doubts at the beginning, but I think Elizabeth believed. She believed that God would do that miracle in her life, and because of that she had these

special spiritual experiences while she was pregnant with John the Baptist.

As we remembered in the class this morning how the people in the Book of Mormon had been given the prophecies and how it must have been very difficult for them to believe when their lives were on the line. In the movie, some of the people doubted, and probably in real life that happened, too. Some of the people doubted, but if we want to live the Christmas story like Zacharias and Elizabeth, we cannot doubt but believe in God’s promises. And if we have doubted, we need to repent, just like Zacharias; because certainly while Zacharias was being so quiet for nine months, he probably had lots of time to reflect. And he definitely, I think, repented because as soon as he could speak again, the very first things he said were praises to God; and God was able to work with Zacharias to bring that special prophecy, so Zacharias certainly repented. If we have doubts in our hearts sometimes, it is important that we live like Zacharias did and we repent so we can have that joy of praising God and being a special instrument for Him.

There are several other stories told in the scriptures of couples who didn’t have any children even though they really wanted to have them just like Zacharias and Elizabeth. You remember the story of Hannah, Elkanah’s wife, who was so sad that she couldn’t have any children that she was just weeping outside the gates of the temple. She was so upset that Eli, who was the prophet, thought there must be something wrong with her. Her prayers were answered, and Hannah did have a son. Her son was Samuel who was the prophet who anointed the kings of Israel.

We remember also the story of Rachel and Jacob. Remember how Rachel didn’t have any children. She was very sad also because her sister Leah had children but Rachel didn’t have any children of her own. But in time, God heard her prayers, and she had two sons. One of her sons, Joseph, was the one who saved the whole family from famine.

Of course, you remember the story of Jacob’s grandparents, Sarah and Abraham. Again, they were getting really old. God had promised that they would have a son, but they had never had any children of their own, and they were getting very old - past the age when most people can have children; but God blessed them and their son Isaac was the child of promise who inherited the covenant of God. So why is this similar story played out so many times in the scriptures? It must be that God is trying to tell us something!

There’s the story of another woman in the scriptures who was going to have a baby, and she represented the church. She struggled against the dragon representing Satan, but she finally did bring forth her child which was the Kingdom of God. And sometimes we look at the state of the church today and it looks like it’s in such a sad condition. We see the divisions in some of the Restoration groups. We see the sad news from the Community of Christ just of late and over the years and we think, “Why? Why didn’t God bring Zion back when the church was young - when she was strong? She seems so weak now, and old. It seems like the time for her to bring forth her child might have passed! But we can have faith, just like Elizabeth. Believe! We know that God’s promises are true - that the church will fulfill her mission - that God can use weak things to do wonderful things in the world, and his promises will all be fulfilled! And so as we try to live out the story of Zacharias and Elizabeth, we must have faith in God’s promises. If we have faith, then we can be living the Christmas story.

Mary - Humble and Obedient Mary

Now, those who have been in Christmas plays in the past will

know that one of the most important characters is Mary. She is one of the featured parts - a very important part for those who are going to be acting in the Christmas play. So, if we are going to live out the story of Christmas, we need to think of how we can live out the characteristics of Mary in our lives.

Mary is introduced to us in the Gospel of Luke. An angel Gabriel; appeared to her and he said, "Hail thou virgin who art highly favored of the Lord. The Lord is with thee, for thou art chosen and blessed among women." And Mary's reaction to the angel Gabriel's coming to her, tells us something about her character. The scriptures say she was troubled and pondered in her heart what manner of salutation this could be, but it doesn't say that she was frightened. Now when Zacharias saw the angel Gabriel, it says he was troubled and fear fell upon him. And when the shepherds saw the angels, we know that they were sore afraid! And those angels had to tell the people, "Don't worry! Don't be afraid! But Gabriel didn't have to say that to Mary because it doesn't say that she was afraid. I think that we can tell from that that Mary must have been a very courageous person; but even more, she must have had other experiences with the Holy Spirit before. This wasn't the first time that God had spoken to her, I don't think, because she recognized right away what was happening. Even though she had a lot to think about, her heart was prepared and her life was prepared so that she recognized, when God spoke to her in that special way, what was happening; and she knew that she didn't have to be afraid.

The angel Gabriel explained to Mary that she would have a son, Jesus, and that would happen through the power of the highest; and he told her that with God, nothing is impossible. Mary believed him and her response was: Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to Thy word." So we understand that Mary must have been a very humble person because even though Gabriel had told her that she was highly favored of the Lord, and blessed among all of the women in the whole world, she still saw herself as a handmaiden of the Lord. She was very humble and also very obedient. She was willing to obey what God asked of her, and she said, "Be it unto me according to Thy word!"

While she was pregnant with Jesus, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was pregnant with John the Baptist, and Elizabeth felt John leap inside her belly when Mary came close. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost and said, "Blessed art thou who believed, for those things which were told thee by the angel of the Lord shall be fulfilled." Elizabeth said, "Blessed art thou who believed" because she believed that she was going to have a son even though she was old, and that was really a miracle. But even more of a miracle was that Mary was going to have a son and she was a virgin and yet Mary believed and Elizabeth commended her through the power of the Holy Ghost for being one who believed. So we see how important it is to believe and have faith in God's promises.

And Mary's words when she spoke to Elizabeth are some of the most beautiful words in the scriptures. They really help us understand the kind of person that Mary was. The words of this passage of scripture are sometimes called the "Canticle of Mary" or sometimes called the "Magnificat", because the first word that she says in Latin is Magnificat! The Magnificat has inspired some of the greatest composers throughout time to write some of the most important and beautiful music. In the choir at CPRS this year, we sang part of the Magnificat, and last year we sang part of the Magnificat by Bach. Many composers have written music inspired by Mary's words. In the words here, we can understand the humility

that Mary had that always comes through, also her love of God and her faith in His covenants. So I would like to read the words of Mary from Luke 1:45-54.

"And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit rejoiceth in God my Savior. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden; for behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he who is mighty hath done to me great things; and I will magnify his holy name, For his mercy on those who fear him from generation to generation. He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their high seats; and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; but the rich he hath sent empty away. He hath helped his servant Israel in remembrance of mercy, As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed forever."

So, as we think about how we can live out the story of Mary in the coming year, we can concentrate on her humility and how she was faithfully obedient to the things that her heavenly Father asked. Now, for those of us who still live at home with our parents, one way that can happen is if we are obedient to our parents right away when they ask. Sometimes when our parents ask us to do things, we want to say, "Can't somebody else do it?" or "I really don't want to." But when God asked Mary to do something very special for Him, she didn't complain. She didn't ask a lot of questions. She just obeyed. And for those of us who live at home with our parents, that's a good way that we can live out the story of Mary in the coming year - to be obedient just the way that Mary was obedient.

Shepherds - Humble and Enthusiastic Witnesses

One of the most fun parts, I think, you can play in the Christmas play is to be a shepherd, because a lot of times the shepherds get to have with them little lambs or they get to have a shepherds crook - you know that curved piece of wood that the shepherds would use to catch the sheep. I always liked being a shepherd, partly because of the extra props that you get to have. And as we think about the shepherds we think about, why do you think it was that God chose to appear to the shepherds to tell them that Jesus was born? Certainly there were lots of people in Bethlehem that He could have chosen to tell that Jesus was born. But He chose to go to the shepherds. I don't know exactly why, but I think that some of the reasons why might be a foreshadowing. You know, we talked about God being the author of Christmas. Sometimes an author will give you a clue at the beginning of the story about what's going to happen at the end. And we know that Jesus was the good shepherd. After He grew up, He was the good shepherd who would give His life for the sheep. So by having the shepherds come at the very beginning, when Jesus was born, we see a clue of what's going to happen later on.

Also it reinforces the idea of humility. Just like Mary was a very humble person, God chose very humble shepherds. He didn't choose rich people. He didn't choose powerful people. He didn't choose the soldiers or the kings. He chose the shepherds to be able to be the first ones to come and worship Jesus. And it shows us how important it is for us to be humble and not think that we are just the biggest and best people; but we recognize that God is the biggest and best, and we are all His humble children.

I think probably one of the really important reasons why God chose the shepherds to appear to to tell about Jesus being born, was because of the way that the Shepherds responded to that message. It says in the scriptures, "And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in the manger. And when they had

seen, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. All they who heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds; but Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart; and the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things which they had heard and seen as they were manifested unto them."

In the Christmas play in South Crysler, as soon as the shepherds have come up and worshipped baby Jesus, they turn around and go running down the aisles and say, "Jesus is born! Jesus is born!" and they tell everybody. And that's just what the shepherds did in real life, too. They went out and had enthusiastic testimonies to tell people of what they had seen - the wonderful news of Jesus. I think that's a part of why God chose the shepherds to be the witnesses and the ones who could come worship at the stable was because He knew that they would be enthusiastic and valiant in their testimonies telling people about the good things God had done for them.

There's a lady who goes to church with us in Independence. She always comes to prayer service. She never misses! Whenever it is time for prayers, she is almost always the very first person who says a prayer, and whenever it is time for testimony, she shares again, usually the very first person to stand up to share. She always has had some kind of experience with God that week whether it is just to share how excited she is to be living in the Centerplace or whether it is some experience with the Spirit that she has had while she was playing hymns at her piano. She almost always is the first one to share her testimony, and she is enthusiastic in her witness. She is living out the Christmas story like the shepherds. She is sharing the good things that God has done with her in her life. And for us, if we are going to live out the Christmas story, it is so important that we are enthusiastic witnesses not just at prayer service at church. The shepherds didn't just go to the synagogues to share their testimony of Jesus. They went and told everybody about the wonderful things that they had heard and seen, and the people were amazed. They weren't expecting that the shepherds would have heard this. It was out of the ordinary. So we need to have the courage to share those experiences even if they are out of the ordinary - even if we think people will wonder at the things that we share. We need to be enthusiastic witnesses if we are going to live out the story of Christmas.

Wise Men Worship God and Give

Now, we think again about our Christmas play. Probably the most fun costumes always go to the Wise Men because they get to wear crowns. Sometimes they even get to wear beards, and they get to dress up. We think they probably had wealth because of the expensive gifts they brought to Jesus, so it makes sense to dress them up in their costumes for the play. They get to have fancier robes, and crowns and everything, and that makes the Wise Men so special in the play.

When we think about how we can live out - not just act out - the Christmas story, how can we be like the Wise Men? What can we learn from them? One of the important things, I think, that we can learn from them is their dedication to worship. Why did the wise men make that long trip? It says they came from afar. Right? Why did they come such a long way on their trip? They told the king, "We have come to worship him!" That's why they made that long trip - to worship. I don't know about you, but sometimes for me on a Wednesday night after I have had a long day at work - Wednesday I have no breaks in my schedule at school, and I have to teach piano lessons after school - sometimes I think, "Well. Maybe we will just stay at home from prayer service tonight." But we usually don't.

Julie doesn't let me get away with that! We usually go, but sometimes I don't really feel like even making just a short drive. It is not as long for me as it is for you people here who have to drive from Lamoni to Mt. Ayr for prayer service, but I don't always feel like it.

But the Wise Men made it their life's work. It was a long journey. They dedicated probably maybe up to two years to make this trip. And why did they do it? They came to worship Him! They were dedicated to worshipping. Sometimes we think that maybe we can live a good moral life and just try to keep the commandments and worship kind of gets left out of what it is to be a Christian for us; but worshipping Him should be an important part of our life if we are going to live like the Wise Men.

And the other thing that I think we can learn from the Wise Men is how important it is for us to be giving. The Wise Men gave very important and good gifts to Jesus, and most of us follow their example in giving each other gifts at Christmas time. And the act of giving is just such a powerful thing that it can really change our hearts. There was a young girl who was getting in trouble from her Mom, and her Mom was going to send her to the girl's room, but her brother was already up there, and the Mom knew that if the brother and the girl were there together, it wouldn't be much of a punishment. They would be having too much fun. So the mother sent to girl to the mother's room to be punished - to have some time out.

The girl was very upset. She didn't think it was fair. She was mad at her Mom. She was so mad that she thought, "I'm just going to mess up this room!" She was so mad she was going to make it all messy to get back at her mother. But when she got into the room, she noticed that the room was a little bit messy already, probably because the mom was so busy taking care of the kids who were not doing what they should that she didn't have time to clean it up herself that morning. And so, for some reason, that girl decided that instead of making the room even messier, she would clean it up. She made the bed as nicely as she could. She straightened up the things that were on the dresser. She tried to pick up anything that was on the floor. She made the room look as nice as she could; and by the time she was done cleaning up that room, something had happened. Her heart had changed. She didn't feel mad at her mom any more. In fact, she knew that she needed to go and tell her mom that she was sorry. And that's what she did. When her Mom came in, she told her that she was sorry for misbehaving. Her Mom forgave her, and she was able to go off and have a good day. And that happened because of the power of giving. At first she didn't want to, but as she started to give her heart changed, and giving has the power to change our hearts. So people who live out the story of the Wise Men and give like they did, then our hearts will be changed.

So we think about our Christmas play and think about the ways we would like to live out the story - not just act it out - not just dress up and have it be something that we put on, but have it be something that is in our hearts - something that we can live out. We thought about how we can repent, believe and not doubt like Zacharias and Elizabeth. We thought about how we can be humble and obedient like Mary. We thought about how we can share our enthusiastic testimony like the shepherds did. And we can give our very best like the Wise Men. I think we mentioned Joseph in there a little bit and the angels, but there is still one very important person in the Christmas story who we haven't talked about. Probably the most important person in the Christmas story, we haven't talked about. Who would that be? (A child responded). "Who is it, Aquilla?" That's right. We haven't talked about Jesus, and we certainly cannot tell or think about the Christmas story without thinking about Jesus.

Jesus, The Creator is Born A Baby - The Most Amazing Miracle Now, the Christmas story in the Gospel of John starts out with a little bit different perspective than it does in Luke or in Matthew where we learn about the Wise Men. I would like to read the first five verses of John's story of Christmas. It says: "In the beginning was the gospel preached through the Son. And the gospel was the word, and the word was with the Son, and the Son was with God, and the Son was of God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made which was made. In him was the gospel, and the gospel was the life, and the life was the light of men; And the light shineth in the world, and the world perceiveth it not."

So John tells us that Jesus life didn't start in the stable in Bethlehem. In fact, He was in the very beginning, and He made everything. John tells us that He, Jesus, is the good news and the light of the world! So Jesus' life didn't just begin when He was born to Mary, but it goes back all the way to the very beginning. John 1:16 kind of summarizes it again. It says: "For in the beginning was the Word, even the Son, who is made flesh, and sent unto us by the will of the Father. And as many as believe on his name shall receive of his fullness. And of his fullness have all we received, even immortality and eternal life, through his grace."

There is a little bit more of John's testimony recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants section 90. It tells us that there is even more that we are going to find out someday, but there is more that we can have right now. so I am going to read from Doctrine and Covenants 90, starting in 1g (through 2d). "And I, John, bear record that I beheld his glory, as the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth; even the Spirit of truth which came and dwelt in the flesh, and dwelt among us. And I, John, saw that he received not of the fullness at the first, but received grace for grace; and he received not of the fullness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fullness; and thus he was called the Son of God, because he received not of the fullness at the first. And I, John, bare record, and lo, the heavens were opened and the Holy Ghost descended upon him in the form of a dove, and sat upon him, and there came a voice out of heaven saying, This is my beloved Son. And I, John, bare record that he received a fullness of the glory of the Father; and he received all power, both in heaven and on earth; and the glory of the Father was with him, for he dwelt in him."

As we think about that part of John's testimony, that is probably the most amazing miracle. We have been talking about a lot of miracles already today, but I think the most amazing miracle out of the Christmas story is that Jesus would come to earth. It says that He came and dwelt in the flesh and dwelt among us. So He came to earth and dwelt in the flesh - in the form of a person. And even beyond that, He would come and be a tiny, helpless baby - that the Word, which is talked about from the beginning would become a baby that couldn't even talk - that the Creator of the Universe would become a tiny baby that couldn't walk, couldn't feed himself, couldn't do anything for himself - to be totally dependent. Even his mind would be the mind of the tiny little baby, and He would have to grow. Because He was taught from on high, He grew grace for grace, a little bit by a little bit. So when Jesus was a baby, He really was a real baby - a real live normal baby. He didn't have the same powers that He had before He came to the earth. He gave all that up to become a tiny baby. And why would that happen? What a wonderful thing; but why would that happen?

There may be lots of reasons, but one of the reasons is because Jesus wanted to show us how to grow - that He could grow from this

small start and grow up until finally it says that God dwelt in Him. Jesus grew grace for grace - a little bit at a time. As He grew older and could understand more, he was able to have more grace. As He grew stronger and could walk around, He was able to follow into places where God would lead Him. He grew from a small start and finally became able to receive the fullness of God.

If we read on in Section 90, it says, "And it shall come to pass, that if you are faithful, you shall receive the fullness of the record of John. I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fullness, for if you keep my commandments you shall receive of his fullness and be glorified in me as I am in the Father: therefore, I say unto you, You shall receive grace for grace."

The real way to live the Christmas story is told to us in that passage. Just as Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Jesus must be born in our hearts. And just as Jesus grew up and received grace for grace, we must also grow grace for grace until we can receive of His fullness. Then we can be one with Jesus, even as Jesus is one with God. What an amazing invitation - to be one with Jesus!

I tell you, the times in my life when I have felt closest to Jesus are the times when I have had the most joy, the most peace, the most love in my heart, the most hope, the most ability to be able to help other people and make a difference in their lives. That's just when I have been close. I don't know that I have ever been totally one with Jesus; but the opportunity is to be, not just close to Him but to be totally one with Jesus. That's the message of Christmas - that Jesus can be born in our hearts and we can grow together with Jesus until we receive of His fullness and really be one.

Zacharias, when he was prophesying, called Jesus the Dayspring. If you think of that beautiful poetic term, the Dayspring - the force of the morning - the light of the dawn. If you think about what our lives would be like without Jesus - how dark and hopeless it would be - there would be no hope, no light. When Jesus was born the Dayspring, you can imagine the dawn starting to arise on the horizon. The first rays come, and then you can start to see the shape of the sun coming, Then it gets brighter and brighter until it grows and becomes a perfect day. That's the invitation for each of us. In Doctrine and Covenants Section 85:18 it says, "And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you, and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things. Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him: for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will."

Now, the first important step in having Jesus be born in our hearts is for us to be born again through baptism - to be laid down in the water and when we come up again like a new person. If there are some of you here today who have not been baptized and you could, you should really think about it seriously and consider making that covenant with Jesus Christ that He can be born in your life. Some people here have not been baptized because you are not eight years old yet, but just like Jesus when He was a little boy, He was taught by God, you can be taught by God right now. That way when you get to be eight years old, you will be ready, and you can make that covenant with Him, too. So I hope that if you are not eight years old yet, you are still growing and that God is teaching you just like He taught Jesus. That way, when you are eight, you will be ready and you can be baptized.

And for those of us who have come in through that gate and have

been baptized, the challenge lies before us this year to really live out the Christmas story - to let Jesus grow. If He has been born into your hearts, let that grow in our lives. Let us grow grace to grace, and not be satisfied with where we have been in the past years - not to be complacent until we have received of His fulness, because that is His desire for us. That's His purpose in our lives - that we can receive of His fulness, not just part of the time but to be totally one with Him - not to just be close, but to be totally one - to receive of that fulness in our lives. And we can do that. It is promised to us. If we keep the commandments we can have that fulness.

I would like us to think in closing about a verse in one of our Christmas hymns. "O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; Cast out our sin and enter in; Be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; Oh come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Immanuel."

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Continued from front page

What did Jesus say? He that seeks to save his life, shall lose it. To a farmer, "you fool, your soul is required of you this night". Take up your cross and follow me. In whom or what should we put our trust? Jesus has the answer. Store up your treasure in heaven where moth and rust doth not corrupt and thieves can't break through and steal.

Where we will put our trust in 2005?

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST
Mount Ayr Restoration Branch
607 E. Madison
Mount Ayr, IA 50854

News and Notes

Christmas Cantata Outstanding Ministry

The Christmas Cantata, "How Great Our Joy" was enjoyed by two appreciative audience. The first offering was on Sunday evening, December 12, in the sanctuary of the Mt. Ayr church. The room was filled with members and guests from the Mt. Ayr community, Lamoni, Leon, Decatur City and as far away as Guilford, Missouri. Cookies and punch were served in the Fellowship Hall as the congregation mingled after the worship.

The second audience to enjoy the musical offering is reported to have numbered some 440 as the Community of Christ church in Lamoni filled almost to capacity for the Christmas Eve service. Violinist Tara Lynn Ramsey, granddaughter of Bob and Jerie Gail Ramsey, and baritone Chad Ballantyne, son of Richard and Bonnie Ballantyne, his wife Laura and his mother-in-law Carol Kimmel also gave ministry at that service.

Thirty-two singers, some from other areas as far away as Independence, Missouri, and some congregational members who were very young, formed the first choir at Mount Ayr. Those who could not rehearse regularly were equipped with CDs of the music so they could prepare to join the choir with a minimum of rehearsal. Still other singers joined the choir for the final rehearsal on Friday morning in Lamoni and ministered Christmas Eve. There were singers from Ceaseless Praise singing in both events. The choirs were directed by Jan Jordison and accompanied by Rhonda Mickelson. Soloists were Charles Doecke and Sue Beck. Tony Crandall and Kathy Akers were the narrators.

Caroling Party Visits Shut-Ins

Plates of goodies were delivered as carolers sang to shut-ins and friends in and around Lamoni and as far away as the Ed Anderson

farm eight miles north of Lamoni. Diane's father, Warren Nash lives there while fighting cancer. After the visits, the carolers reassembled at the home of Pat and Gerald Bolingbroke for a soup, veggies and warm cocoa supper. Gifts had previously been delivered to the family adopted by the congregation.

New Year's Eve Party

The New Year's Party is always a fun time for the congregation. This year it comes at a time too late to be reported in this news letter.

Graceland Winter Term Plans Completed

Two Graceland University winter terms are of special interest to the congregation. Steven Smith's silver-smithing class enrolls nineteen students. His testimony is that the Lord has made possible the provision of equipment and supplies not thought possible with the funds available.

Ronald Smith will be taking 22 to Guatemala to visit archaeological sites that may be related to the places and happenings reported in the Book of Mormon. Lyle Smith of the Pre-Columbian Studies Institute will be escorting the group and assisting with the instruction which will begin in Lamoni and Independence prior to the actual flight from Kansas City Airport on January 8, 2005. Our prayers go with them.

Business meeting planned

A congregational business meeting to discuss the budget for the new year and other matters will be held Wednesday, Jan. 26, at the church at 7 p.m.