

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

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New Year's Resolutions

This is the time of year when we often take stock of our lives and determine if there is something that we would like to change in the new year -- an old habit we would like to break or a new habit we would like to establish.

My wife Valle is determined that after the rich food and feasting through the holiday season, that my New Year's Resolution will be to be more careful with eating in the new year to try to shed some of the pounds that I have put on over the last few months. I'm not quite sure that it counts for someone else to make a resolution for you, however. Without making the resolution yourself, the change probably won't be too lasting.

While people around the world make resolutions at the first of the year, followers of Christ have more than one opportunity for a new start each year.

We are called to take time for reflection on our lives and to repent (see with new eyes) the things we called to do as followers of Christ and the things we have done instead when we come to the Communion table each month. We have the opportunity to remember that we have taken upon us the name of Christ and promised to follow him and to look at our lives and see if that covenant is making the difference that it should in our every day life. People have written about modern Christians and the ease they have in living one way on Sunday morning and another on Saturday night. May our resolution be to be God's sons and daughters all the time in 2006.

TESTIMONIES AND SERMON NOTES

Celebrating a Covenant

High Priest Robert Rolfe, in charge, opened the service reading from Mosiah 3:6-9: "And we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God, to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days, that we may not bring upon ourselves a never ending torment, as has been spoken by the angel, that we may not drink out of the cup of the wrath of God.

"And now, these are the words which King Benjamin desired of them; and therefore he said unto them, Ye have spoken the words that I desired; and the covenant which ye have made, is a righteous covenant. And now, because of the covenant which ye have made, ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters: For behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him, and have become his sons and his daughters." The Oblation offerings were received and the Emblems of the Lord's Supper were served before Priest Ed Anderson spoke.

God Trusts Us With His Most Precious Gift

December 4, in the Anderson family tradition, is a pretty important day. It was Ed's next older brother's birthday and the day the family searched the farm for just the right tree for their Christmas celebration. Ed's family was not rich enough to buy a store tree, so December 4 the family all went out, looked around, decided upon the tree, cut it down and took it home.

Although I said December 4 was the beginning of our celebration, it really wasn't. Living out on the farm, we hunted, we took walks in the woods, and we were always keeping our eye open for that one particular tree. When we walked by an evergreen in the midst of the forest, we would say something like, "You know, that kinda has a little bit of potential. We aren't sure. N-a-a-a. Those branches aren't just right!" So we would keep looking. When the time comes to choose, we usually had two or three trees from which to make our choice. Sometimes we would have one selected. Sometimes not; but on December the fourth we would come home with one regardless.

It really didn't matter what it looked like. It was going to be our Christmas tree. We did the best we could. We put the bad side to the wall. We covered up the top if it was too big. We did some creative

things, and after we got all of the decorations on, it really did look pretty good. Although it was probably a straggly tree, we filled in the open spaces with bulbs and tensile and all those kinds of thing, and it looked pretty good!

The Family Anticipates Christmas

With the tree decorated, that was really the true mark of the beginning of our Christmas celebration. At that point we started listening to Christmas songs. When we were putting up the Christmas tree we put on the phonograph. Some of you kids don't know what a phonograph is. This was a really new invention. You could play more than one record - not at the same time, but you could stack them up. One would fall and play. When it was done, the next one would fall. We would lie under the tree and poke at presents, look at ourselves in the bulbs and generally be thinking about Christmas, what it stood for, what gifts we were going to get. We had turned our hearts and minds toward Christmas and when snow came, that was an additional sign that Christmas was near.

When we got to Christmas Eve, we had a special tradition. We would have a special snack and get to open one gift. We might only have had four presents, but we got to open one of those Christmas Eve. We anticipated getting up really early - four or five o'clock in the morning - Christmas morning to open the rest of the presents. Mom wouldn't allow that, but we anticipated that. We would all state that we were going to get up at four or five o'clock Christmas morning and go open our presents. It never happened. It would end up being about seven o'clock, but we were always waking Mom and Dad up opening presents. We didn't eat breakfast first. That wasn't on our agenda, and our parents didn't enforce that we be nutritionally correct. The important thing was opening the presents.

Of all the presents that I have received over the years, there are very few that I can really remember. I remember one Christmas it was something like 55 degrees, and I got a bat and a ball. It wasn't a baseball. It was one of these super balls. We went out in the front yard, going to play baseball with that super ball. Well, my brother was quite a bit older and he was doing the batting. The super ball went over the road and sailed about 200 yards. By the time he hit it with the bat, it was gone! I guess our treatment of the presents wasn't quite as good as we should have thought.

One present I remember that I did treasure. It was a tractor that my Dad made for me to ride. He had made cars that the other kids rode, but he made me a tractor. It had the pedals. He made the chain, the steering system, everything, and I rode that around the house. We had the capability in our house that we could just go around in circles, so I just went around in circles with the tractor. With Christmas day, the anticipation was over! The gifts were ours!

Christmas Anticipated For Thousands of Years

When we look at the scriptures, when we look at God's workings among His people, from Adam down there has been this anticipation - the prophecies, that Christ was coming. It is only two thousand years down the road. Can you imagine waiting for Christmas for two thousand years? "Yes, Adam, we are going to have a Christ, and it is only two thousand years from now!". But still, the people went along each and every day with that gift there available for them. Some of the people obeyed Him. Some of the people did the things that God commanded them to do in anticipation of the gift.

Isaiah prophesied six hundred years from now, we are going to have a Christ. We are going to have the Savior of the World. For the people over here in America - five years and Christ was going to be born. Five years - that's even too long for me to wait for Christmas!

I don't think I could wait for five years for Christmas. But they did. They waited for five years for the birth of Christ. As we kind of believe, sort of - that some of those were so anxious that they didn't just want to wait and observe from a long distance off. They may have made that trip to see Him personally.

We have been able to count on His word. When God and Christ say something, we know it is going to happen. We believe it is going to happen. Our major question is, "Is the person who is saying it speaking for Christ or are they speaking for themselves?" When it is God speaking, it is guaranteed. It will happen. That's our premise. We trust upon those things. We trust in the resurrection. We trust that Christ was born, that He was resurrected, and that He brings all men unto Him through this gift.

On the other hand, God had done something that was humanly impossible to do - to give the gift of a son! He gave the gift of His Son entrusting us with that gift! I am not sure what I could give up, not knowing how it would be treated. If I thought somebody was going to throw my gift away, I'm not sure I would be able to give my gift. But God did! God had to be aware that some of the people would throw His gift away - would go out on Christmas day and knock the ball over the road! Some would not respect the gift. We have been entrusted with that gift, and it is our responsibility to make that gift viable for those people around us, for ourselves - to bring it to life - to bring others to Him by that gift. That is His amazing trust in us.

When we partake of the sacrament, we say the same thing - "I promise You I am going to do these things that You commanded me. I promise I am going to tell my neighbor. I promise You that when I am all alone where nobody can see what I am doing, nobody can know what I am thinking, I promise You that I am going to do what You want me to do.

When I have the opportunity to not quite be honest, do I put in that extra five dollars. When I split this up, do I split it up equally. Do I get my favorite red one, or do I get that red one - that red toy - that red M&M, whatever it is, do I give it or do I keep it for myself? Nobody will know. I have already eaten mine, and I give those to my friends. Do I give my best, or do I keep the best for myself? It's that trust. When nobody else is watching me - when nobody else knows! God trusts us with that gift of His Son. He trusts that we are going to respond and we are going to give the best, our best, to Him.

The sermon was followed immediately with Brother Robert Rolfe playing his guitar and asking the audience to sing along, "Soon and very soon, we are going to see the King."

Eternal Judgment

Elder Gerald Bolingbroke opened the morning message on December 11, with a scripture from John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his Only Begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish; but have everlasting life."

He continued by telling the congregation that he was recently a delegate to the Conference of Restoration Branches, held in Independence, Missouri, in November. He described it as a very interesting and meaningful conference. There was much discussion on some of the business, but all those who opposed some of the opinions of others were very kind to each other. There was a good spirit at the conference.

Something he wanted us to consider the morning of December 11 is that judgment follows this life. Remembering this fact is very important to each one of us. We need to live a good life so we can

go through the judgment of God more easily. The thought of judgment was on the mind of the Apostle John, for he returned to it again and again.

Let us look at some scriptures by John. First let's look at John 5:22: "For the Father judgeth no man; but hath committed all judgment unto the Son;"

In John 7:24 we find these words: "Judge not according to your traditions, but judge righteous judgment." And in John 16:8 the apostle says: "And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment;" John reported the healing of the man who was blind. After the healing by Jesus, the healing was questioned by the Pharisees. They tried to get the man to denounce Jesus. After this questioning, they cast him out, and Jesus sought the man. He asked him if he believed in the Son of God. Then the man answered, "Who is the Lord that I might believe in him?" Jesus answered and told the man the one he was talking to is the Son of God.

In the Inspired Version of the Bible in Matthew 7 we find these words: "Judge not unrighteously, that ye be not judged; but judge righteous judgment." But in the King James Version it says "Judge not, that ye be not judged." What a difference this is from the Inspired Version. The Inspired Version tells us that it is permissible to judge, as long as we judge righteously.

Then Jesus said in John 9:39, "For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind:" The Pharisees heard these words and asked Jesus "Are we blind also? Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin; but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth."

We see that judgment was not the purpose by which the Son of God came into the world, but judgment was the inevitable result of his coming. There is no escaping judgment. Either those who see Jesus respond to His message, or they reject Him and are spiritually blind.

Revelation and judgment go together. The gospel of John shows the Lord moving among men and sifting them. He loves us, but He sees the horror of sin which abandons the love of Jesus. Whenever men are confronted with the Lord Jesus Christ, their reaction indicates their character. This is judgment which does not have to wait until after death but takes place immediately.

The Master himself said in John 5:24, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He who heareth my word, and believeth on him who sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death into life.

He who sees and believes is judged already. Any judgment which may come after death is no worry, for such a one has already passed from death to life. Judgment is inevitable. It is the nature of things that the day of revelation is a day of judgment.

Isaiah saw the Lord. In Isaiah 6: 1, 3 it is recorded that Isaiah saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and heard the seraphim cry to one another, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.

And it was when the grandeur of the divine majesty and glory enlightened his soul that he said, "Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

The judgment with which God is concerned is judgment according to righteousness. Many years before the time of the Lord Jesus, Isaiah spoke in the name of God saying, "Judgment also will

I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet."

Later Amos expanded this illustration when he said, "The Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said unto me, Amos, What seest thou? And I said, a plumb line. Then said the Lord, Behold, I will set a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel." The plumb line of judgment is the straightness or the crookedness of those who are judged. We note that the prophet said it was to be set in the midst of the people of God.

Changing the metaphor but pursuing the same thought, the Psalmist likened the process of judgment to the blowing of the wind. He says the ungodly is like the chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in judgment, or sinners in the congregation of the righteous. (Psalm 1: 4,5)

The Restoration is a movement of light. We live in a time of truth in the life of His Son. We also live in a time of renewed revelation of the greatness of God; we are living under judgment. But few of us have recognized it.

Let us look at a scripture from Revelation. Revelation 14:6-7 states: "And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come; and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters."

All of us have been inspired by the thought of an angel flying in the midst of heaven. We all have rejoiced that the everlasting gospel has been brought back to the earth and is to be preached in every nation and kindred and tongue and people. It is already preached in many nations. This very fact brings men and women to judgment.

This judgment which was prophesied by the angel, and which is now upon us, is different from the great Day of Judgment which comes after death.

That such a day is coming, and is inescapable, is taught in the Scriptures. Hebrews 9:27 says: "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment;" And also in II Peter 2:9, "The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished;"

The New Testament helps us to see that the judgment which God passes on men and women, whether they are good or bad, is never a purely objective judgment. The Father and Son and the Holy Spirit are always involved. If we see the light and walk in it, this is because we obey the commandments of God. Many men do not think of God very often or not at all. The hour of His judgment is already come as well as to come in the future.

The judgment of God proclaimed in the angel message is a major force in the lives of the faithful. It is eternal judgment in the sense that it is the judgment of the Eternal Heavenly Father. But it is also the judgment that the people pass on themselves. If we would be whole we must measure ourselves day after day against the standards set by the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We feel the truth when our most penetrating ethical judgments are applied to ourselves. When we criticize others we gain nothing but should sense our sins. But when we see the sins and know the standard of judgment which they indicate by the standard of our Lord Jesus, which is love, we can change. It is by the quality of love that we will be judged in time and in eternity.

There is plenty of biblical evidence that the Lord Jesus loved the Pharisees in spite of the fact that he denounced them. Jesus

called them “serpents” and a “generation of vipers.” He likened them to “whited sepulchers” and said that the publicans and harlots would go into the kingdom of God before them. All of us have something of the Pharisee in us. The judgment we pass on other people is something we should measure against the background of eternity. The hour has come when men and women must practice God’s judgment. Love and love alone redeems us from a harsh judgment. We must have charity, which is the pure love of Christ, to enter the Kingdom of God, as is stated in Moroni. Brother Bolingbroke continued by reading Moroni 10 verses 15 and 16.

“Wherefore, there must be faith; and if there must be faith, there must also be hope; and if there must be hope, there must also be charity; and except ye have charity, ye can in no wise be saved in the kingdom of God;

“Neither can ye be saved in the kingdom of God, if ye have not faith; neither can ye if ye have no hope; and if ye have no hope, ye must needs be in despair; and despair cometh because of iniquity. And Christ truly said unto our fathers, If ye have faith, ye can do all things which are expedient unto me.

There are many wonderful testimonies which can illustrate the need for us to always be mindful of the judgment. One of those testimonies was written by W. N. Dawson and is entitled “A Vision of Judgment.”

It was about nine o’clock, Sunday Morning, April 19, 1908, when Dawson was thinking of the great plan of salvation, of death, the resurrection, and the great judgment day, when suddenly the scenery was changed.

He saw himself walking on a vast plain toward the southeast. It did not appear to be as light as noonday, but more like a cloudy day, yet there were no clouds to be seen, neither sun, moon, nor stars. He could see in the vast distance toward the north and northwest a low mountain range, with here and there a tall peak. In the west he could see at a great distance where the land merged with the sea.

Before him, some forty or fifty miles, there was an elevation in the land, beyond which the land was moving in a wavy fashion. The land where he now was walking was of a dark gray color, with no signs of life, neither beasts, birds, insects, nor man. There were no trees, shrubs, nor vegetation of any kind, neither had there ever been. The land was not dusty, but exceeding dry. There was no road or trail, but he was going in a direct course southeast. He seemed to know that the judgment day had come, and he was to be judged.

He was walking along studying about what the result would be with him, when suddenly he felt someone take hold of his right hand. On looking up he saw it was an angel of the Lord, the one whom he had seen many times before. They walked along together in silence, neither one speaking to the other.

Presently he looked up and saw, not a hundred yards ahead, the elevation in the land, at the edge of which was a great white throne, with steps leading up at the front. The wall at each end of the steps, the floor, which was some forty or fifty feet square, and the great chair of state, were all composed of the same white material, unlike anything he had ever seen before, not like marble, crystal, nor glass, but more like diamonds. As they walked up the steps he noticed that the steps were six inches high, eighteen or twenty inches wide, and twenty feet long, twelve of them in number.

When they approached the throne, he saw two persons; one sat on the throne and the other stood at his right hand. They looked so very much alike that he could not tell one from the other until he saw the hands of the one standing. There were the wounds made by the nails. He instantly recognized him as the Lord Jesus. His eyes,

unbidden by him, looked at his feet. He had on sandals. Dawson saw the cords that passed around his feet and between his toes. There were the wounds made by the nails on Calvary. Then he wondered if the spear-wound would show in his side. At this moment he turned his body slightly toward the Judge, his beautiful white robe parted, showing the wound made by the spear; not like the pictures we have seen.

The wound was on the left side below the lower rib and pointed upward, and judging from the side of the wound the spear must have reached the heart. When Dawson found that he could speak he said, “Lord Jesus, I heeded and recognized your voice, as you spoke through your servants; I accepted the plan of salvation that you offered. I followed not the strangers when they called on me. I loved your law, and tried to keep your commandments. I know that I did many things wrong, but I did that which I thought was the best under the circumstances at the time. My hope, my trust, and my faith are all centered on you.”

Then he noticed an angel sitting with his back towards him, and a little to his right was the largest book he had ever seen. It was about two feet thick and nearly six feet square. It seemed to open of its own accord. It was ruled in bright lines, more than an inch apart. He saw his name written about the middle from the top to bottom at the left hand side in the most beautiful handwriting he had ever seen. The letters were more than an inch in length and he wondered why his name only was there, when he was informed there was a name between each of the lines, but they who looked on this book saw only their name and their sins written opposite.

Then he noticed his sins written between the lines in the smallest letters he had ever seen, too small for him to read. Some places were very dim and some very bright, indicating the degree of the offense. Some places were so thick, indicating the degree of the offense. Along toward the farther edge of the book it was thinner and dimmer. As he looked back and forth over this record of sins, he was surprised. He never thought that he had committed a hundredth part of that many sins. He felt sick at heart, and thought that his heart would sink away within him. His knees knocked together.

Then Dawson felt the strong left hand of the angel, as he put his arm up under Dawson’s right arm at the shoulder, to hold him up. Then Dawson looked again at his Savior. The Savior turned to the Judge and said, “This is my child. He has tried to keep my commandments; and with my blood have I purchased him.” Then the Judge, looking directly at him, said, “Inasmuch as you have tried, wherein you failed, the blood of mine Only Begotten is sufficient. Your sins are forgiven you.”

The angel who had the big book took up what appeared to be a marking brush. The angel did not dip it in anything. He set it down on the first word of Dawson’s sins. It filled the space between the lines. Then the angel drew it across the two pages of the book some ten or eleven feet. It left a trail or streak of red like as of fresh blood. When the angel got to the farther edge of the book he raised the brush off the book, and all the red blood and writing of sins vanished, leaving the book clean, as though no blood or writing of sins had ever been there. Then the passage of scripture came to Dawson’s mind, where it reads, “They washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, and made them as white as snow.”

He noticed now, for the first time, that he no longer had on clothes as we now wear; instead he had a most beautiful white robe. It was made rather low in the neck, with a broad, loose band at the waist, of the same material. It was unlike the dead, dull, stiff,

starched white linen; but instead it was soft and pliable to the touch, as the finest silk, with a luster far more beautiful than satin, not a dazzling white. It was a white most beautiful to behold. He tried to express his thanks to his Savior, but could do so only in looks.

The look the Savior gave him he shall never forget, when the Savior said, "You have done well; enter into the joys of your Lord. Then the angel who held his hand led him around to the right of Jesus, and back of the throne. He was so busy admiring his beautiful robe and thinking of the wonderful things which he had seen and heard, that he did not notice where the white of the throne left off and the green of the grass began, but there were no steps going down at the back of the throne.

How far they had gone before he looked up he did not know, but the most beautiful sight he had ever seen met his view. When he looked up, he saw small streams of clear running water and green grass, the most luxuriant he had ever seen, with tall trees with overhanging boughs, with bright green foliage a hundred times more beautiful than any spring of the year he had ever seen in any place.

He heard a voice a little to his right, and in the speaker's care he was placed by the angel, when he informed him that he must return and perform a like service for others, as he had for him. Then Dawson heard voices, and he had returned to the earth.

What a marvelous testimony Brother Dawson has shared with the world. It is true evidence of the compassion which Christ has for all those who will endeavor to follow his commandments and become one with Him.

Brother Bolingbroke closed his message with scriptures from Revelation 14:7-8 and Matthew 5:23-24. First, Revelation 14:7-8: "Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come; and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters. And there followed another angel, saying, Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication."

And then in Matthew: "Ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time that, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill, shall be in danger of the judgment of God. But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother, shall be in danger of his judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, or Rabcha, shall be in danger of the council; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire."

Brother Bolingbroke encouraged us to keep the commandments so we will be able to go through the judgment without any problems. We have all sinned, but we must repent and rely on Jesus to wipe out our sins. His prayer for us is that we will be able to go through the Judgment and have our sins wiped out and that Jesus will return soon.

On the Morrow I Come Into The World

Pastor H. Alan Smith was the speaker. The scripture he chose was from the Book of Mormon, 3 Nephi 1:10-13. "Now it came to pass that when Nephi, the son of Nephi, saw this wickedness of his people, his heart was exceeding sorrowful. And it came to pass that he went out and bowed himself down upon the earth, and cried mightily to his God, in behalf of his people; yea, those who were about to be destroyed because of their faith in the tradition of their

fathers.

"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."

Jim Barber followed singing, "What Child is this? with it's own declaration, "This, this is Christ the King!" Alan continued with the explanation: In looking for part of the Christmas story to talk about today, I was drawn to the promise from the Christmas story in America, "On the morrow come I into the world." It is an amazing story of Christmas and how people react to the promise of Christ's coming. In it there are some lessons for us in our lives today as well

The fulfillment of the promise begins with the giving of the promise. People of Book of Mormon knew the promise of Christ's coming from the very beginning. It was taught all through the Book of Mormon times. Some people believed, others did not. There came a time of wickedness for many of the Nephites in the 86th year of the reign of the judges, despite the efforts of Nephi and Lehi, the sons of Helaman. The Lamanites had responded to the teaching of the Nephi and Lehi, however, and were following God's way at the time.

Samuel, a Lamanite Prophet, Is Sent

So it was that God sent Samuel, a Lamanite prophet, to preach repentance to the Nephites. (Helaman 5). Samuel was thrown out of the city of Zarahemla on his first attempt and was headed back to his own land when the voice of the Lord told him to turn around, go back and prophesy to the people the "things that should come to his heart." So Samuel went back and got up on the wall of the city because they would not let him in at the gate.

Samuel started with a promise that did not make the people of Zarahemla happy. In 400 years, he said, the sword of justice will fall upon the Nephites. Heavy destruction will come, and nothing can save the people, except repentance and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ, "who surely shall come into the world, and shall suffer many things, and shall be slain for his people."

How did Samuel know this? He told the people that an angel of the Lord declared it to him, and the news about Jesus brought "glad tidings to his soul." Many others had a similar experience when they heard the news. They, too, felt they had received glad tidings to their souls. And Samuel said, "I was sent to declare glad tidings to you, so you could have glad tidings, too, but you would not hear it." Samuel goes on to tell the people that except they repent, 400 years will not pass away before the Nephites will die by the sword, famine and pestilence and there will be those of the fourth generation who will live at the grace of their enemies to see the utter destruction of the Nephites. Even now, he told them, their great city, Zarahemla would already have been destroyed had it not been for the righteous who lived there. The wickedness and abominations in the city were so great, Samuel said, that the righteous who are in Zarahemla are preventing the Lord from destroying the city with fire right then. Samuel pointed out a number of the ways in which the Nephites were being wicked and disobedient to their Lord. One important way he stressed was that they were relying on their riches too much, and brother Smith asked whether we might see ourselves in that situation at the moment. For them, there was going to be a curse put on the land and when people hid up their treasures they could not

be found again. Only righteous people who hid up things to the Lord would be able to find them again. (Helaman 5:28-32).

“You are cursed because of your riches”, Samuel declared, “and your riches are cursed because you have set your hearts on them and have not hearkened unto the words of him who gave them to you. You do not remember the Lord your God in the things which he hath blessed you, but ye do always remember your riches, not to thank the Lord your God for them. Your hearts are not drawn to the Lord but do swell with great pride, unto boasting, and unto to all manner of iniquity.”

Samuel explained how when prophets come to testify of sins and iniquity of the people, the people got angry and tried to destroy them, just as they had tried to kill him.

“But behold, if a man shall come among you and shall say, Do this, and there is no iniquity; do that and ye shall not suffer; walk after the pride of you own hearts and after the pride of your eyes, and do whatsoever your heart desireth, ... You will receive him and say that he is a prophet.” He is the one the people will lift up and to him give of their substance. Because he speaks flattering words to you and says that all is well, you don’t find fault with him.

He told them their riches would become slippery that they can’t hold on to them, “and in your poverty you will cry to the Lord in vain.” You will lay a tool here today and on the morrow it is gone. (Brother Smith commented that happens to him already.) When that day comes, Samuel prophesied, the people would say, “Our iniquities are great, please turn your anger from us.”

“But behold, your days of probation are past: ye have procrastinated the day of your salvation until it is everlastingly too late.” (Brother Smith said he was intrigued with the wording of being everlastingly too late.) “For you have sought all of the days of your lives for that which ye could not obtain; and ye have sought for happiness in doing iniquity, which thing is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great and eternal Head.”

The Signs of Christ’s Birth Revealed

Samuel said the people still had an opportunity to repent. Then he gave them the sign of Christ’s birth; “For five years more cometh, and behold then cometh the Son of God to redeem all those who shall believe on his name. (Helaman 5:55-59) And behold, this will I give unto you for a sign at the time of his coming; for behold, there shall be great lights in heaven, insomuch that in the night before he cometh, there shall be no darkness, insomuch that it shall appear unto man as if it was day; Therefore there shall be one day and a night, and a day, as if it were one day, and there were no night; and this shall be unto you for a sign; for ye shall know of the rising of the sun, and also of its setting; Therefore they shall know of a surety that there shall be two days and a night; nevertheless the night shall not be darkened; and it shall be the night before he is born. And behold there shall be a new star arise, such an one as ye never have beheld; and this also shall be a sign unto you”.

As a sign of His birth, there would be a day and a night and a day without darkness, despite the rising and setting of the sun. A new star would appear, such as they never have beheld. All of the wonders that would accompany His birth were foretold so there would be no excuse for any not to believe.

Along with call for repentance and signs of Christ’s birth, Samuel also gave signs of Christ’s death and resurrection. (Helaman 5:68-80). “And behold, again, another sign I give unto you; yea a sign of his death; for behold, he surely must die, that salvation may come; (Helaman 5:69-84) “Yea, it behooveth him, and becometh expedient that he dieth, to bring to pass the resurrection of the dead,

that thereby men may be brought into the presence of the Lord; Yea, behold this death bringeth to pass the resurrection, and redeemeth all mankind from the first death; that spiritual death for all mankind, by the fall of Adam, being cut off from the presence of the Lord, or considered as dead, both as to things temporal and to things spiritual. But behold, the resurrection of Christ redeemeth mankind, yea, even all mankind, and bringeth them back into the presence of the Lord; Yea, and it bringeth to pass the conditions of repentance.” (Helaman 5: 75-84). “

But behold, as I said unto you concerning another sign, a sign of his death, behold, in that day that he shall suffer death, the sun shall be darkened and refuse to give his light unto you; and also the moon, and the stars; And there shall be no light upon the face of this land, even from the time that he shall suffer death, for the space of three days, to the time that he shall rise again from the dead; Yea, at the time that he shall yield up the ghost, there shall be thunders and lightnings for the space of many hours, and the earth shall shake and tremble, ... And behold there shall be great tempests, and there shall be many mountains laid low, like unto a valley, and there shall be many places, which are now called valleys, which shall become mountains, whose height thereof is great. And many highways shall be broken up, and many cities shall become desolate, and many graves shall be opened and shall yield up many of their dead; and many saints shall appear unto many.

“And the angel said unto me ... that these signs and these wonders should come to pass, upon all the face of this land; to the intent that there should be no cause for unbelief among the children of men;”

(Helaman 5:84-86). “And this to the intent that whosoever will believe, might be saved, and that whosoever will not believe, a righteous judgment might come upon them: and also if they are condemned, they bring upon themselves their own condemnation.

Christ’s Gift- Freedom to Choose

“And now remember, remember, my brethren, that whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself; and whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge, and he hath made you free;

“He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death, and ye can do good and be restored unto that which is good, or have that which is good restored unto you; or ye can do evil, and have that which is evil restored unto you.”

He made it clear to all that if we are condemned, it is our own fault. No one else could be blamed. We are agents of our own judgment.

Samuel told how the Lamanites were striving, with unwearied diligence, that they might bring the remainder of their brethren to the knowledge of the truth. Then he prophesies for our day. (Helaman 5:103-104). The promise is to the Lamanites - notwithstanding the many afflictions which they shall have, the Lord shall be merciful unto them and they shall again be brought to the true knowledge, which is the knowledge of their Redeemer, and their great and true shepherd and be numbered among his sheep. But unless the Nephites repent, they will be utterly destroyed in 400 years.

Many who heard Samuel’s words repented and sought Nephi, son of Helaman, to be baptized. Many others, the more part, responded by trying to kill Samuel.

Time goes on. Angels appear to wisemen and Nephi turns

records over to son Nephi and departs out of the land. By now it is the beginning of the ninety second year of the reign of the judges - - more of the prophecy begins to be fulfilled. Greater signs appear and greater miracles are wrought among the people. Samuel had prophesied about great signs and wonders in the heavens as part of what would happen.

But remember the time line. Samuel had come in the 86th year of the reign of the judges. His statement was, "Five more years cometh and the sign will be given." Its early in the 92nd year of the reign of the judges. (3 Nephi 1). Depending on how you count -- time is running out. Five years are up. Some began to say that the time was up for Samuel's prophecy.

Who was a Lamanite anyway to tell us what's right and what's wrong? If the sign was wrong, they didn't have to worry about the call to repentance either. They began to rejoice over those who believed and taunted them saying, "Your joy and your faith concerning this thing has been in vain."

They made a great uproar in the land, and the believers began to be very sorrowful -- worried that those things which had been spoken might not come to pass. But they steadfastly watched for the sign, that they might know their faith was not in vain. The unbelievers set a day when those who believed in traditions would be put to death if the sign did not appear.

Nephi, now the spiritual leader in Zarahemla, had newly taken over responsibilities for plates and all of the sacred things when his father, Nephi left. He had probably preached a number of sermons on the promise Samuel brought. He knew Samuel to be a good man from his father's knowledge of Samuel and the Lamanites who were following the Lord because of Nephi and his brother Lehi's ministry. He had seen and heard of miracles that his father and uncle had been part of, but we don't know the extent of his own ministry and experience with the spirit of God. Alan said he wondered if Nephi didn't wish that he could talk to his father about what to do as the leader of the people at this time.

Nephi saw the wickedness of his people and his heart was made exceedingly sorrowful. The scripture doesn't say his first concern was for himself and his family. He was concerned for the wickedness of the people around him. Had he taken Samuel's prophecy to heart about choices people have to make and dire consequences of wrong choices? On this day, he went out, bowed himself down on the earth, cried mightily to his God, on behalf of his people that were about to be destroyed because of their faith in the tradition of their fathers. Now this was not some false tradition, but belief in Christ which unbelievers called a tradition.

Jesus Christ Speaks to Nephi

Nephi prayed all day and then heard the voice of Jesus talk to 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 the holy prophets.

"Behold, I come unto my own, to fulfill all things which I have made known unto the children of men, from the foundation of the world, and to do the will, both of the Father, and of the son of the Father, because of me, and of the Son, because of my flesh. And behold the time is at hand, and this night shall the sign be given."

What had to happen for this to be fulfilled? God was working on the other side of the world as well. Mary and Joseph were making long trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, so the prophecy that Christ would be born in Bethlehem could be fulfilled. (Are any of you

mothers willing to ride a donkey or walk long distances on the day before your child is to be born?) I have even wondered if Christ had been born in a stable if it had not been that his birth was needed on the other side of the world that night.

Isn't this a wonderful testimony of the fact that Christ was not just a man. On the eve of his birth, he could speak to someone and try to explain what He was doing and why He was coming to earth. What an added testimony of who Jesus was that other Christians do not have in their understandings of the Christmas story!

The sign did appear. There was no darkness when the sun set and the people began to be astonished. Many who had not believed fell to earth. The sign had been given, people began to fear because of their iniquity and their unbelief. In fact, all of the people were so astonished that they fell to the earth. There was another part of the sign- - the appearance of the new star -which also took place.

Even seeing the signs with their own eyes didn't last long for many. In three years people who hadn't believed before began to be less and less astonished at a sign or a wonder from heaven. Yes, I saw a sign, but the sign was somehow done by man or the power of the devil to lead away and deceive the hearts of the people. And Satan did go about, leading away the hearts of the people, tempting them and causing them that they should do great wickedness in the land. Are there any parallels from the story of Christmas in ancient America and our lives today? What about our reliance on riches. Does Samuel's prophecy say anything to us today in this regard. "You are cursed because of your riches and your riches are cursed because you have set your hearts on them and have not hearkened unto the words of him who gave them to you.

You do not remember the Lord your God in the things which he hath blessed you, but ye do always remember your riches, not to thank the Lord you God for them. The hearts of people are not drawn to God but drawn to boasting and on to all manner of iniquity.

We live in a world where we have religious groups saying: "We believe that personal experience, conscience and reason should be the final authorities in religion, and that in the end, religious authority lies not in a book, or person, or institution, but in ourselves." That is a quote!

We live in a world where people are saying: "Christ is not the only way to salvation. That is too exclusive. That is being too narrow."

We live in a world where people are saying: "Christ was a good teacher but he was in no way divine. He was not resurrected and he certainly will not return. Your joy and faith concerning such things have been in vain. The traditions of your fathers that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, who was here from the beginning in creation and came to bring us back into God's presence are outdated.

We live in a world where people are saying -- Joseph Smith was a person who created "revelations" to provide cover for his personal sinful whims.

Do these kinds of powers at work in the world make us begin to be like some of the believers at Nephi's time who began to be very sorrowful -- worried that those things which had been spoken might not come to pass?

Or do we stand up like Samuel the Lamanite, to the slings and arrows of the crowd, and proclaim glad tidings of great joy from a sense of wanting others to know the truth. Do we respond from a concern, like Nephi's, for the iniquity of the people, and try to share the good news that we are free to choose. The judgment that awaits us is of our own making! We can procrastinate our repentance. One way will lead to having the glad tidings of great joy with us each day.

The other can lead to bringing ourselves our own condemnation - that we can procrastinate the day of your salvation until it is everlastingly too late.

Are we steadfast when we see God working in our lives or are we quick to forget? Do we too quickly become less and less astonished by a signs or wonders from heaven?

And what about the promise that on the morrow I come into the world? We have the testimony of many that Jesus was born that night more than 2000 years ago -- and what a difference this has made in our lives and our world. But we also have the prophecy and the promise that Jesus will come again -- on the morrow. And we have the signs that will let us know it is time.

Signs of His Coming Again

From the 24th chapter of Matthew: "And they shall hear of wars and rumors of wars, Behold, I speak unto you for mine elect's sake. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there shall be famine and pestilences, and earthquakes in divers places, and again, because iniquity shall abound, the love of men shall wax cold, but he that shall not be overcome, the same shall be saved. And again, this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world, for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come, or the destruction of the wicked.

"And again shall the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, be fulfilled. And immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven shall be shaken. Verily I say unto you, this generation, in which these things shall be shown forth, shall not pass away until all I have told you shall be fulfilled.

"Although the days will come that heaven and earth shall pass away, yet my word shall not pass away; but all shall be fulfilled. Then shall appear the sign of the son of Man in heaven; and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn. And they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And whoso treasureth up my words, shall not be deceived. For the son of Man shall come, and he shall send his angels before him with the great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together the remainder of his elect from the four winds; from one end of heaven to the other."

Are we looking forward with the anticipation of the people of Nephi's time or does it take the threat of death to make this important to us? There is a deadline. There are people who are going to die if there is not a people who will bring in the kingdom. Just like Mary and Joseph hurrying to Bethlehem for the birth of the Son of God on that night so long ago that the sign might be given that would save the lives of those believers half a world away, so we are challenged to bring in the kingdom of God in time to save the lives of many around the world.

"On the morrow I come into the world." I hope this is a glad tidings of great joy for us even today.

Christmas 2005

Church School was canceled for Christmas Sunday so families could have more time together before coming to the service. Seventy Ronald Smith, who was in charge of the service, greeted the congregation in the name of Jesus Christ, noting especially those who had come home for Christmas, and announcing it was a bitter sweet day for some. Beverly Walker of the Decatur City branch died of a massive heart attack Saturday night. Fran Wilson

led the prayer of the congregation for the Walker family. Brother Smith then announced the hymn, "Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem" asking us to pay particular attention to the phrase, "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given."

The call to worship was taken from Luke 2:28-33, the story of Simeon seeing the Christ child in the temple. "Then he took him up in his arms, and blessed God and said, Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel. And Joseph, and Mary, marveled at those things which were spoken of the child."

We sang, "What Child Is This?" Gordon Winkler offered the invocation and Aquila Galusha responded with his guitar playing the song we had just sung, "What Child Is This?"

Silent Night, the Hymn

Michael Jordison gave a power point presentation of the story of "Silent Night", and we understood why Ron had asked us to pay particular attention to the phrase in the first song we sang. Projected on the screen Mike had scenes of the countryside in which the hymn was written and those persons and objects involved in its writing and ministry. He began with the illustrated story of Christ's birth as told in Luke 2::8-16: .

"And there were in the same country, shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, an angel of the Lord appeared unto them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid. But the angel said unto them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this is the way you shall find the babe, he is wrapped in swaddling clothes, and is lying in a manger.

"And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace; good will to men.

"And it came to pass, when the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go, even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord has made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger."

Many years later a young Priest of 24 reflected on this passage of scripture as he made the long walk home back to Mariapfarr. He had come at the request of two of his parishioners to bless their young child. Their visit that afternoon had been longer than he had anticipated, and now his return journey would see him back to the church late in the evening. The night was quiet and still. A clear sky afforded a peaceful view of the moonlight atop the glistening peaks of the Austrian Alps. Fresh snowfall from earlier that day had covered the rolling hills with a holy blanket clean and pure.

Since his appointment a year earlier at the small pilgrim parish, There had been many nights such as this that the young priest found himself beneath the silent stars alone with his thoughts. There were no sounds from the highway from the valley below. There were no brightly lit cities to cast their light upon the sky above. There was nothing to distract the imagination from the serenity of the moment. It was, perhaps, on a night like tonight that it happened, he thought. The shepherds alone in field when the angels came bearing tidings of great joy. What a marvelous sight to behold breaking in upon such a quiet night among their flocks. The majesty of the hosts of heaven giving glory to God - singing praises and worshipping His

name!

Then, almost as suddenly as it came upon them, the hosts retreated into heaven, and the shepherds were left again to the stillness of that beautiful night. "Oh, yes. It must have been a night like this", the young priest thought. "A night where the peace of God had settled upon all the land. A night that the world would hardly notice if not for the declarations of heaven itself. And in the serenity of such a moment, the shepherds would have found themselves hurrying through the streets of Bethlehem searching for the sign the angels told them."

As the young priest's thought reverted to the events of the day: the meager country home of the young couple, the sincere and earnest concern of the mother and father, the innocent child whom he had held and prayed for, he was moved to think of the holy family. And when shepherds peered into the lowly stable, they would have gazed upon a scene similarly serene. How gentle the hands that placed the child in the manger would have been! The child's mother gazing intently upon the gift from God and Joseph. The lad's adoptive father accepting the responsibility that no other man would inherit. How protectively he must have stood over his wife and the child for they sat in the lowliest of places - truly a sight of such innocence yet poignancy. "It was a blessed and holy night," thought the young priest, and it was upon these things that he dwelt while making the journey home that silent night. As he at last pressed through the doors of the church where he was stationed, it was not difficult to believe that the words to a lovely poem had almost constructed themselves. Although the night was growing late, he lit the candle upon his desk, and drawing out a few scraps of parchment, dipped the quill into the ink and put the melody of his thoughts in print.

Father Joseph Mohr, born in 1792 in Salzburg, Austria, was ordained by the Salzburg Archdiocese in 1815. His first assignment was as assistant priest in a small country parish in Miramar, and it was here that he wrote the poem that in time would stir the hearts and souls of millions around the earth. The following year Mohr was transferred to St. Nicklaus Church in Oberndorf where he worked with Father Josef Kessler. The pair took occasion to add bits of German to their Latin masses, which allowed the parishioners to understand what was being said for the first time. Mohr felt strongly that their worship should be understood by all and sought opportunity to make things more common for all the parishioners. And while working to this end, he quickly became friends with the church organist, Franz Gruber.

Gruber lived in nearby Arnsdorf where any stories tell that there was a problem with the organ in St. Nicklaus the Christmas of 1818. Some claim that mice had eaten through the bellows rendering them inoperable. Some blame Gruber himself for sabotage of the organ causing it to be silent that Christmas. Most likely Father Mohr had wanted something different for Christmas, something that would touch each and every one of the country folk of his parish. Whatever the reason, Joseph took the poem he wrote two years earlier to his friend, Franz Gruber, and asked him to arrange a simple melody for a guitar accompaniment. Gruber accepted the task, and in a short while brought the composition to Mohr in time for the service that night. Arrangements were quickly made for the choir to accompany, and the music was set. That night, December 24, during midnight mass, the world's most stirring Christmas hymn debuted at St. Nicklaus in Oberndorf. Father Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber sang the duet with Mohr accompanying on his guitar. The choir repeated the last two lines after each of the six verses that were sung

by the pair. "Silent night! Holy night! All's asleep; one sole light. Just the faithful and holy pair. Lovely boy child with curly hair. Sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace."

At this juncture Ron Smith joined Michael. They each took up their guitars and sang the first verse of the beautiful duet in German as it was sung that first Christmas in Oberndorf.

Two traveling families of folk singers, the Strassers and the Rainers from the Ziller Valley picked up the song and sang it in a concert in December of 1832. It was during this period that several musical notes were changed and the carol evolved into the melody that we know today. The song, now translated into over three hundred languages has easily become one of, if not the most popular Christmas song. And it would take 24 years from the time it was first sung in New York until translated and arranged into English. The Episcopal Priest, John Freeman, is credited with the arrangement as it now stands in most English hymnals. The song worked its way through Europe and North America gaining devotees wherever it was sung.

Nearly one hundred years after the song was first sung, Europe found itself in the midst of the great war. It was 1914 that many of the soldiers on both sides thought that they would be home by Christmas to celebrate victory. But victory was not realized as they thought, and the war would linger on for a brutal three more years. For the soldiers yearning to be home, Christmas in 1914 meant more of the same, with no apparent end in sight. The weather turned cold on the western front, and the mud and the slop from the trenches crusted over with ice. For weeks the fighting had gone on. Spurred by the familiarity of the enemy and a mutual feeling of respect, the soldiers had refrained from firing on each other during meals. Occasionally, because the trenches were often close to each other, they would wrap a stone in a newspaper and toss it over to one another hoping for a return gesture. They sought anything new that would help them break the monotony of the war. This courtesy caused the British in early December to issue an order forbidding fraternization with the enemy. Despite the efforts of the commanding officers, the men were hesitant to observe their orders.

Less than a week before Christmas, Germans who had engaged heavily in battle the night before, held up their hands in truce and sought to retrieve their wounded from the middle ground. The British held their fire and soon found themselves retrieving their own. They exchanged awkward greetings and offered to help each other bury their dead. With Christmas fast approaching, many of the Germans put up small Christmas trees on the parapets of their trenches. Eager to kindle the Christmas spirit, many of the Germans lit candles and lanterns singing Christmas carols one to another. Illumined by the fire light, they were easily seen by the British sentries. Miraculously, they held their fire. The Germans held up Christmas trees with lit candles above their trenches in a show of Christmas greeting.

Then it happened. A few Germans began to sing "Stille Nacht" The British, familiar with the tune began to sing along. And though difficult to determine exactly who first or when, a few soldiers climbed out of the trenches still singing the song written by Mohr and Gruber. They shared what they had - bits of food, cigarettes, beer and chocolate, making gifts for one another.

As Christmas day wore on, more soldiers joined the undeclared cease fire, and soon were heavily engaged in soccer matches where just days before they had been engaged in battle. In places along the line, the celebration continued for three days until a few reinforcements were moved up and some divisions were ordered out. It was

apparent that generals were not in favor of the activity, and they did what they could to break up the fraternization. In one instance along the line, the truce had just begun by mutual agreement. Captain C. I. Stockwell recalled how after a truly silent night, he fired three shots into the air at 8:00 AM on December 26, and climbed onto his parapet. The officer who had given him beer the previous day, appeared on the German parapet. They bowed, saluted and climbed back into their trenches. A few moments afterwards, Stockwell heard the German fire two shots into the air, and, as he said, the war was on again. During the next three Christmases of World War One, similar truces were initiated, but none of them played out.

The song, Silent Night, had an impact during the Second world War as well. Fighting was suspended on many of the fronts Christmas eve as soldiers tuned their radios to hear recordings of the Austrian opera star, Mme. Ernestine Schumann-Heink sing "Stille Nacht." Madame had family on both sides of the war - one fighting for the Axis and another for the Allies. Nearly two hundred years had passed since the young priest, Joseph Mohr penned the melodic words set to the music of Franz Gruber, and though the tune and translation have altered slightly, the meaning and intent of the authors have not. Today we are just as inspired from our imaginings of that holy night when our Savior entered into the world as a tender child, and we are reminded that indeed, all is calm and bright when illuminated by the light of Christ. Rich or poor, young or old, American or otherwise, we are obligated to acknowledge that truly, for all, Jesus is, "Lord, at thy birth".

The offering was received. We sang, "Heir of All the Ages" to guitar accompaniment.

Nothing Is Impossible With God!

High Priest Sherman Phipps took his place behind the pulpit and announced, "I want to back up a little bit and read a part of what I consider to be included in the Christmas story but which usually comes before where we start. You will recognize this as coming from Luke, the first chapter." (Luke 1:5-42) :

"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia; and his wife being of the daughters of Aaron, and her name Elizabeth, Were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless; And they had no child. Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well stricken in years.

"And while he executed the priest's office before God, in the order of his priesthood, According to the law, (his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord,) The whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw the angel, he was troubled and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias, for thy prayer is heard, and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. Thou shalt have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice at his birth; For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God; And he shall go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

"And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife is well stricken in years.

"And the angel answering, said unto him, I am Gabriel, who

stand in the presence of God, and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee these glad tidings. And behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words which shall be fulfilled in their season.

"And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he tarried so long in the temple And when he came out, he could not speak unto them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple; for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless. And as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

"And after those days, his wife Elizabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach from among men.

"And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God, unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth. To a virgin, espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her and 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 when she saw the angel, she was troubled at his saying, and pondered in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

"And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favor with God. And behold, thou shalt conceive, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David; And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Then said Mary unto the angel; How can this be?

And the angel answered and said unto her, Of the Holy Ghost, and the power of the Highest. Therefore also, that holy child that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And behold, thy cousin Elizabeth, she hath also conceived a son, in her old age; and this is the sixth month with her who is called barren. For with God nothing can be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

"And in those days, Mary went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda, And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elizabeth. And it came to pass, that when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost, and she spake out with a loud voice and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb."

At the close of the scripture reading, a quintet sang "Were you there? Were you there when the world was filled with His holy light?"

The Sermon: The Greatest Gifts

Brother Phipps returned to the pulpit, assuring us he was aware of the time. Because of the limited time left for the sermon, of necessity he abbreviated his presentation.

I am not one who thinks Jesus was born on December 25. In fact, I would probably pick a different day if I had to pick one, he said, but I am willing to celebrate and rejoice with anyone on any day they want to pick as long as it has to do with the birth of Christ; and this is the day that many, many people pick. So I don't mind. In fact, I enjoy Christmas, contrary to what some in my family might say. Sherm alluded to the fact that his method of wrapping presents has long been to put them in Hy Vee sacks and staple over

the top. He noted that he did not want it said that his kids thought of him as the Grinch, but among his Christmas gifts this year was a book from his daughter titled, "The Judge Who Stole Christmas".

There is one thing about Christmas that I really like. It is sort of one of those funny things. I really like the idea, but I don't like what we have done with it. That's the giving of gifts, and of course, the birth of Christ was the greatest gift. We seem to have taken that and turned it around and we give material things - which is all right if it expresses your love for the other person. But I am always concerned that we not let the giving of material - temporal things - distract from the greatest gift of all - that being Jesus Christ Himself. Christ told us a number of times that He was the example for us. That which we saw Him do, we were to do. And surely He intended for us to give, not just things, but to give ourselves to one another. I am always reminded when I think of that, I have nothing to give except it came from Christ - it all came from God through Christ. So we each have our special gifts that the Lord has blessed us with to be able to pass them on to others.

I thought about the gifts that come to us through the birth, the death and the resurrection of Christ. Of course, we know our very lives come from God. We would not exist- nothing would exist except for God. In His great kindness and mercy He has given us the gift of His Holy Spirit - the Comforter - to teach us the truth of all things, and to comfort and guide us on a daily basis.

He has given us the gift of light. Every body here has probably thought about that. I think it is interesting that - and Alan read in the scriptures from the Book of Mormon last week one of my favorite scriptures about the birth of Christ. I had kind of intended to use it today, but I think it is interesting that the sign of Christ's birth to the people in this country was a day, a night and a day with no darkness. His birth was celebrated with light! At the time of His death there were three days of darkness. I won't try to get into what I think all of that means, but I will just throw it out there and let you think about it. And then, following that three days of darkness, when He was resurrected, the light came forth again. I would certainly have to, in my life, anyhow, have to associate light with Christ whether you are talking about insight or whether you are talking about the sun coming up in the morning or the moon at night. I have always been really interested in that, but I will try not to get off into it. It is amazing to me how before the sun is even up, my house, which is usually dark, starts filling up with light. Where does that come from? Well, it comes from the presence of God and permeates everything, which is what I would like to have His Spirit do in my life. I would like to quit resisting and allow Him to permeate every part of me.

Well, I told you I would keep this short. I know you have other things to do and places to go - hopefully not places other than the presence of Christ!

How could we ever possibly say "Thank You" to God for this gift of His Only Begotten Son? For myself, I have decided the only thing I can possibly do is to try to give my life back to Him. I don't pretend I have done that. It is something I have to keep working on every day. But I hope not just today, but every day we will be conscious of this great gift that has been given to us.

One other gift I believe that has come to us from God through His Son, Jesus Christ, is the gift of death. We have heard that today is a kind of a bitter sweet day because of the death of our sister. (Beverly Walker). I know a couple of you have already heard this if you were at my mother's funeral. But surely, one of God's choicest gifts to us - and I know we are celebrating the birth of Christ

today, but one of His choicest gifts to us is also death as to the temporal body. Without that gift, we would never be able to come back into His presence. We would be stuck in this form. So that's another thing you can think about. I have considered the Scriptures in Genesis that talk about how Adam and Eve partook of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and what was one of the first things God did? He sent a cherubim with a flaming sword to the tree of life to make sure they didn't partake of that; because if they had, they would have been stuck in this temporal state forever. He didn't want that to happen. He wanted them to come back unto Him.

God's Message To a Child, and Us

I have one other little thing I feel like I need to do. "Sam, have you been praying for your grandfather and praying he would live to spend Christmas with you?" (Samuel Jordison, a child of about eight years was being addressed. His grandfather had been put into hospice at the hospital in Leon a few days before because of the medical judgment that he had a very short time to live. He had regained strength and was still living beyond the time predicted.) Samuel nodded vigorous ascent to the question Brother Phipps had proposed, and Brother Phipps continued with deep emotion, "God wants you to know that He has heard your prayer and He has answered your prayer. He will always answer your prayers when you look to Him and believe in Him, And He wants you to know, too, that when it is time for your grandfather to return to Him, you shouldn't be sad. It will be a joyous moment!"

Benediction

Brother Smith, our presider, spoke. "Let's share in the joy", and we sang, "Joy to the World, the Lord has come! Let Earth receive her King!" and were dismissed with this benediction: Father in heaven, we are grateful for the many, many blessings that You have given to us. We thank You for the words of life that have come to us this day. We thank You that You do speak to us, that You have spoken to Sam, and that you have touched the hearts of all of those who are loved ones of Merle and loved ones of Bev and all of those who have come this day. We pray, Lord, that You will keep each one in Your hands and that whatever happens as we go from here that Your love will remain, comfort, guide and direct us. We thank You for the lives of all of those who are a part of this church family, and we pray for Your church throughout the world - those who have come to You and have been a part of that everlasting covenant.

We pray that each one will have a magnificent Christmas as we share in the love of those around us and of the bounties which You have provided. May we always remember You and keep You and the gift that You have given first in our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

News & Notes

Offering for Liberia

A special offering was taken with the December Communion Oblation for use by the church in Liberia. Previous plans had been made to assist with the proposed vacation church schools to be held in the three new congregations established there beginning with the ministry of Randy Vick and those who went to assist him last summer, Ron and Di Smith and Pat Bolingbroke among them.

Before the offering was accepted, Pat Bolingbroke read a letter from the Liberian Priesthood detailing the need for funds to provide food and a small gift for an estimated 225 children. Those desiring to assist were asked to mark their offering for that purpose. A total of \$1,870 was sent to assist in the work of the Liberian congregations.

How Great Our Joy Enjoyed Again

After the Zionite dinner that followed the December Communion Service, the congregation reassembled, along with several from other congregations who had sung in the Christmas cantata last year, and sang through the cantata again. Jan Jordison directed, Rhonda Mickelson accompanied, Charles Goecke and Sue Beck were soloists and Tony Crandell repeated his service as a narrator. The experience was an inspiration and a joy!

Congregation Witnesses at Mount Ayr Window Walk

Saturday, December 10 the congregation portrayed the portion of the Christmas story related to the visit of the Shepherds to the manger when the Christ child was born. The manger scene was placed in the window of Aunt Jennie's Attic. In a very realistic atmosphere created under the direction of Michael Jordison and Gordon Winkler, the shepherds worshipped. The Christ child was in a real manger on real hay that also blanketed the stable floor. Several sheep and a donkey further validated the site. "Baby Jesus" lay in the manger and from Him light radiated to all the onlookers, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and those of us who stood in awe watching the scene. Shepherd's crooks and staffs identified the shepherds, and one little shepherd even brought his flute.

A lighted screen of a laptop computer at the lower left-hand corner of the tableau told the Bible story of the event; and a painting of a Judean hillside over which the stars twinkled continuously in the upper right gave testimony of the place from which the shepherds had come. The costumed cast portraying the event was changed from time to time. It was made up of Gordon and Linda Winkler, Michael and Julie Jordison and their children, Samuel, Isabel and Joshua, Cheryl Phipps, Valle Smith, Yvonne Galusha and her children Jazmyn and Gable (Gable carried the staff carved for the occasion by his brother Aquila who was involved in a Boy Scout event and could not participate.)

A picture of the scene, especially featuring children at the manger, was chosen to be exhibited as the full page Christmas greeting of the Mt. Ayr Record News to be viewed by the thousands of Record News readers spread over many lands. What an opportunity for the branch to give ministry!

See more news on back page

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST
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News and Notes

Branch Carolers

A chorus of about twenty five singers went from the home of Pat and Gerry Bolingbroke carrying plates of goodies prepared from the offerings of the singers and others at the home Sunday evening, December 18. They caroled at selected homes, principally ministering to elderly and shut-ins, Other less hardy souls remained at the Bolingbroke home, caring for the youngest and sharing in the supper the Bolingbrokes provided for all.

New Years Party Enjoyed

Lynda and Robert Rolfe hosted the branch's New Year's party held December 31. The evening was spent in eating, singing, playing games and in worship. Because it was the night before Sunday worship, 2006 was welcomed in a little early!

Fasting Weekend Planned

The days of fasting for the "souls of those who know not God" is scheduled for January 6-8. We will pray at the homes of Norman and Cathy Nelson in Lamoni and at the church in Mount Ayr at the times we would otherwise be eating. Our fast will be broken with soup dinner at the church after the morning worship on Sunday, January 8. A planning session will follow.

Service weekend set

One of the new projects for the congregation is a quarterly service weekend, where people will join to reach out and help people with chores they need to have done that they can't do themselves. If you know of a project where we could help with volunteer labor, let pastor Alan Smith know. The event will be held Saturday, Dec. 28.