

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 2007.

TESTIMONIES AND SERMON NOTES

Remembering the Birth of a Child

The scripture I have chosen this morning is Luke 2: 8-14, Priest Rodney Bastow announced December 3, 2006 just after the emblems of the Lord's Supper had been served. "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."

When Brother Bastow resumed his sermon, he expressed his appreciation for the song Barbra Jordison had just sung, "Come to Jesus and live." Then he commented; Before we came up here (to the front of the sanctuary), Alan asked me if I was ready. (With deep emotion Rodney replied to the congregation), How would I know if I am ready until I feel that feeling that comes right here. (And he touched the area over his heart.) What is it that George says to us? How are you today? And he says, "Blessed". Are we blessed today? And when we get done with this, will we be able to say that we have been blessed again? I don't know. I don't know until I am done. I pray that God will allow us to be blessed here this morning, and I know if I feel like I have been, I will praise His name for all the glory that should go to Him for that blessing.

Last weekend, you might have noticed - we weren't here. We just had to go to St. Louis to be with our new granddaughter, Sophia, and her parents. I am sure glad last weekend was not like it is this weekend in St. Louis. It was great down there last weekend. This weekend it is kind of a mess.

But in two short months that little girl has become the main thing that I think about. You know, it is amazing how the cycle of life continues. Almost nine months after my father passed away,

three of his grandchildren became parents. About a year and a half later, after Mom passed away, two other grandchildren became parents. One of them became a parent for the second time. And now, our son has had a child and within the next month to two months there will be three more babies coming into the Bastow family. If Mom was still here the way she was, wouldn't she be having a time right now. You know, with my mom, it didn't matter whose baby it was. They were all very special to her. She just really loved them.

My brother and sister - their kids are responsible for most of these grand babies right now - especially my sister and her husband who I talk to probably the most of any, have told me how great it is to be a grandparent and how much they have enjoyed being a grandparent. Just wait until you are a grandparent. I thought, "I can wait!" Now the problem with being a grandparent, you have to kind of get old to be one, and I suppose that bothered me a little bit. And I knew in our own situation, maybe it wasn't a good situation. Maybe it wasn't good for Patrick and Nina to have a child. Nina is still very much loyal to her Jewish faith. And that has concerned me, I guess, somewhat, and it has concerned me about them having a child. I guess there might have been a little bit of hesitation for me. When they first told us the news that Nina was expecting, we didn't want to get too excited because we were afraid we might jinx it. So we tried to stay calm and cool about this.

The Birth of a Baby

We knew she was going to have the baby in October, and as it got close to that time, Nina's doctor, who had delivered her, her sisters, about six of her cousins, her mother, her two aunts, was the one who was going to have to deliver this baby. Well, he was scheduled to take a trip October 6 for China and wouldn't be back for two weeks. What do you do? So they decided to go ahead and have the baby by Caesarean, which just doesn't seem the right way for me, but I know it happens a lot. It's just - you are not supposed to know when the baby comes. You know what I am saying? It is supposed to just surprise you! One day, and there it is! But they knew exactly the day and the time when this baby was going to get here. And we decided not to go down because of all her family down there, there would be such a crowd, we would just wait for that first weekend when things would kind of clear out a little bit.

So, here I am at school waiting for that phone call to tell me that my granddaughter had arrived. And, like I said. This wasn't going to be any big deal to me. I wasn't going to get excited about this. But the clock just kept moving so slowly! And I started having this pounding in my chest. I had gone to lunch and kind of drifted off a little bit thinking about something else, when all of a sudden there is a tap on my shoulder. "You've got a phone call!" So I jump up and I take the call and find out that Nina and the baby are both here and doing Okay.

That was kind of a sign to me. It was a kind of a sign to me that, "Yes. This is a good thing. This is a good thing!" And we went to see Patrick and Nina that weekend. As soon as we held that baby, I knew it was a really good thing. The baby, when they delivered it, had cords wrapped around it. They said, if she had had it naturally, and I don't know, but maybe the baby wouldn't have survived. To me, that's another sign of the gift of this baby.

We decided that we could wait a month before going back to see the baby. That may have been a mistake, but we had several pictures, and if you don't believe me, Debbie has them right there. We thought that might get us through. Patrick would E-Mail me pictures, so I would E-Mail the pictures out to all the staff, and I would get back all of these nice comments about what a beautiful

baby she was, and I had to agree - and all the hair she had and everything like that. I knew the other teachers knew that I was a little bit excited about this because one day they came and presented me this frame - a grandparent's frame, and it had all of the things on it. And it just made got to me. They had her picture in it, so I put it on my desk for people to see that picture of her every day. I found out how to put her picture on my screen saver. I look over there. There is that beautiful face, and it just touched me so much. It is just such a nice, credible feeling, and I can't describe her.

We went back last weekend, as I said, and she is changing really fast. She has the chubbiest cheeks, it's hard to believe. And her little thin legs have filled out, and she is just doing really well. And her mother, who we had been somewhat concerned about, is doing really well, too. We were glad to see that. We were glad that Patrick and Nina left us alone with the baby for awhile while they went out and got a couple of Christmas trees and things. that was really neat. The baby was such a good baby, it slept through the first night, and that was kind of disappointing. But the next night, for some reason they tried to get her to sleep an hour or two early. I knew that was a mistake, but they wouldn't listen to me. So about 4:30 she is awake - and she's wide awake. So they gave her a bottle and changed her and I said, "Debbie, go out and see if they will let us have her." Fortunately, it was Patrick up with her instead of Nina, and he was willing to let us take care of her while he went back to bed.

So we brought her down stairs. Sophia has this habit. When she is sleepy, she gets these eyes fixed wide open - really wide like she is staring off someplace, then all of a sudden she is asleep. So I took her and I put her on my tummy and I just kind of rocked her back and forth, and she went to sleep. It was so enjoyable to hold her like that! You know, when you have got a gift like that that God has given you, and you can feel that close to Him, everything just seems so calm and so peaceful! And it is hard to think about not liking somebody - about being angry - because all you can feel when you have that baby on you like that is love. You know, all that Sophia wants is to love and to be loved.

Remembering The Baby Whose Birth We Celebrate

While we were down there, Patrick thought he would take that opportunity, since the weather was so nice, to put up his Christmas lights and to decorate their two Christmas trees. And while he was doing this, it reminded me that we were about to celebrate the birth of another baby. You are probably aware of that, aren't you? Are you excited about it? Are you excited because it is a break from school for awhile? Are you excited because it is gifts? Or are you excited because you know why Jesus was given to us, and you know how important He is to you?

I hope we all remember Him. I hope we can all feel that we are close to Him. I hope we can all feel His touch. One thing really bothers me. Look around. Do you see any pictures of baby Jesus? Do you have pictures of Jesus when He was a baby? You know, I can show you pictures of these, and Jesus had to look a lot like this baby -- maybe a little more hair -- maybe darker complected. We really need a picture of Jesus when He was a baby. I really don't care for these pictures very well, because you can't really see the love there, can you? If you saw a picture of Jesus as a baby, I think you would see that love that He would have for all of us.

Sometimes, especially as I have gotten older, I get rather calloused, or the kids call me a grinch. As a teacher - this is just a difficult time of year to be a teacher because the kid's focus is not on solving equations, and I get more concerned about making it to

that Christmas break than I do about Jesus. But, you know this year, I hope as we get close to Christmas, and I look at the Christmas trees and the ornaments on the trees and the other ornaments that I see, the decorations, and when I drive by the houses and I see the lights that are on - as I listen to the Christmas music and as I hear the music - as I hear the joy and the laughter from my students and the other little ones, I hope when I am doing that, that I am seeing a picture of Jesus and remembering Him. And I hope I remember when I am seeing that, how special His birth was. I hope I will love Him more. I hope I will try to be closer to Him.

We have made a commitment today to do that, haven't we? We have made a commitment today to be more loving - to be more caring - and to be more forgiving so that we can also be forgiven. And I hope as I try to picture Jesus, I try to be more kind, to be more loving and forgiving of others. And I hope, as I picture Him I can have that same excitement the shepherds had as they spread the news that Jesus, our Savior, is born. Glory to God! Peace on earth. From Luke 2:15-20, "And it came to pass, as 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 hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at these things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all of these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as they were manifested unto them."

I hope in the days ahead we can share with others our picture of Jesus and let them know that He is born. Glory to God. Peace on earth!

Appropriately, the closing hymn of the service was, "Send me forth, oh blessed Master."

The Lord Cometh!

"As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him; Rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ, for in Christ dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.

"And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance; for ye serve the Lord Jesus Christ." (Colossians 2:6-9; 3:23-24). These words of Paul were the choice of High Priest Sherman Phipps as he prepared us for his sermon December 10, 2006. The congregation joined Alan and Valle Smith, at their request, singing a hymn, that speaks of the birth of Jesus and the meaning of that birth to the nations of all time. It begins, "There's a song in the air. There's a star in the sky. There's a mother's low prayer and a baby's low cry. And the star rains its fire while the beautiful sing. For the manger of Bethlehem cradles a King." Then Sherman spoke.

Mike asked me Wednesday night if I might be willing to speak this morning, and I told him I would. I hope by the time we are done here this morning that the Lord will have given us something

because of myself, I don't know what I should say. I have struggled since. I have received three words, and I will tell you what those are eventually.

Mildred had the worship last week. One of the things in particular she pointed out before she really got started with her presentation, was the fact that we know that December 25th is, of course, not really very likely the birthday of Christ. But it's the time of year when generally people take time to acknowledge the birth of Christ. I hope that's what we do. Sometimes I think today we have kind of lost track of that. It gets all commercialized, and it gets kind of frustrating to me. My kids, if they were here, would probably say, "Yeah, that's him, the Scrooge!" But my "Scroogeness" really comes mostly from my frustration with how we treat Christmas, because we should be busy acknowledging the birth of Christ and what that means to us.

Again this morning, I feel like I am standing here preaching to the choir. Everybody here probably already knows anything I could possibly say to you about the scriptures and about the birth of Christ. I know we are still early in the season, and there will probably be other people after me who want to speak about the birth of Christ. Maybe they will have plenty of opportunity to do that, and I won't have interfered much, because as I thought about the birth of Christ and as I thought about the story that Sister Mildred shared with us last week, my mind kind of skipped ahead a little bit. I thought about Samuel, and I went back and read about Samuel and how he came to the people and how he prophesied that Christ would be born in five years. He had a time for it. I don't have that this morning with respect to what I want to talk about. But he told them five years, and it's amazing if you go back and read the story, how, even after he came and told them that, they paid little attention.

What If We Knew the Day?

So, I don't know what would happen to us this morning if someone were to stand and by the power of the Spirit, tell us, "Here is when Christ returns!" I don't know whether that would change much for us or not. When I think about it, just myself, I think, "Oh Boy! Wouldn't it be nice to know what day Christ was coming back?" I treat that like as though it would change everything. But, historically at least, as you read the story, it doesn't seem to work that way. A lot of people just don't pay any attention to it at all and those who do, seem to, within a short time, get right back into the same routine - which that would be me, probably.

But, I said, my mind kind of skipped ahead because Samuel came and prophesied that Christ was coming. He even gave them a time frame. He gave them a sign to look forward to, And, of course, we know that the sign that he gave them came to pass. And it was very timely, too, because, as you know the story, those who just plain didn't believe in the prophesy had finally apparently got tired of hearing it. I don't know what promoted them other than the adversary, and they picked a date also. They said, "Everybody who believes in this foolishness is going to be put to death if this sign hasn't materialized by this certain date.

Nephi, the son of Helaman, was very concerned for the people. He went out and prayed and the Lord spoke 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 show unto the world that I will fulfill all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets." (3 Nephi 1:12-13.)

I didn't realize until this week when I was reading that, and reading some other things also, that those words are similar to he

words of Alma who, along with his people, was in bondage. And this goes back about a hundred and twenty some years, but Alma was concerned about the bondage of his people. It's a little different situation because his people, it says, had great faith and they were very patient, and they listened for the Lord. The voice of the Lord came to Alma and said again, "Be of good comfort, for on the morrow I will deliver you out of bondage." (Mosiah 11:65). I didn't remember those two experiences having such similar wording.

Anyhow, Nephi became very concerned about what was going to happen because of those who did not believe and of their intent to put to death the believers. So he went and prayed, and he got his answer. Just as the Lord told him, exactly. That very night the sign was given. It was a little different experience for the people in this country than it was for the people in Jerusalem. I say that then wonder if that's true or not, because I don't know how many people in Jerusalem really acknowledged the birth of Christ. I don't know how many people there, when He was born, recognized that He had been born - the Savior of the whole world! Most of them probably missed it.

On the other hand, for the people in this country it was pretty visible that the sign had been given. If they had paid attention, they knew what the sign meant, and they knew that Christ had been born. But, I guess what I was thinking about is, for the people in this country, such as Nephi and those who understood the prophecies, they understood - and this is the thing I wanted to kind of skip forward to - they understood that His birth also meant His death - His crucifixion. And they knew some of the things that would come to pass at His crucifixion, too. I think, as I read the scriptures, some of them tried very hard to preach to the people and to take the message of repentance to them, to get them to repent so that when Christ was crucified, and the great destruction that had been foretold in this country came to pass, these people would not be lost, but as many of them as possible could be saved.

With Christ's Birth Comes The Rest of The Prophecies

That brings us to where I am this morning in relationship to the birth of Christ. Along with His birth comes all the rest of the prophecies; and if you know, it was prophesied that Christ's birth would come in the meridian of time. What are the exact words? Is there more to it than that? We have been told that Christ will return to the earth, and there are a number of things we are told will happen before His actual return to the earth. I wonder some days the way I live - I will just pick on myself. You can think about your own lives. I wonder some days if my belief that that's going to happen is reflected in the way I live. I wonder what it was like to be in this country when Samuel prophesied that Christ was going to be born in five years. Whose lives could you have looked at and said, "They believe that! They really anticipate that Christ is coming." And I look at myself and I wonder, "Would anybody ever look at me and the way I live and imagine that I believe Christ is going to return to the earth - that He will come?"

We have been told that Christ will return to the earth in the days of wickedness and vengeance. Is that right? That's what the scripture says, isn't it? Well, I took a few minutes - (I always tell you to do this, and I hope you do it. You need to go home and look at this stuff yourself. You don't need just to take what I find as being fact, because I am certainly not a biblical scholar.) But I dug out my Strong's Concordance, and I took that scripture from Genesis 7:67, which says, "As I live, even so will I come in the last days, in the days of wickedness and vengeance...." I went and looked up the words wickedness and vengeance trying to figure out if there was some-

thing about those words and their meaning that would give us a hint as to when that might be. And here's what I found. (And again, go look for yourself. You might have a different point of view on it.) It looked to me like He was saying, "As I live, even so I come in the last days - in the days of adversity and affliction, of great grief, of harm and sorrow and trouble, of wrong and misery, In the days which break things to pieces - which make things turn to nothing."

And here is an interesting part of what I thought I found when I looked at that word. Wickedness comes from a word that has to do with tending the flock; but it is that those who attend the flock, pretend to be a friend but do so falsely. It seems to me like we have that today, that those who are supposed to be shepherding the flock, (I'm not talking about you guys and gals right here,) but those who are supposed to have been tending the flock, have not done so. They have pretended to care, but they have acted falsely. That was what I found when I looked at the word wickedness. The word wickedness also talked about being loose morally, living riotously and vilely. And this, I thought was significant. Wickedness had to do with treating lightly that which is important. Does that sound like our day? It did to me!

Then I looked at the word, vengeance and what I got out of that word was days of quarreling, of holding grudges and seeking revenge. And it also had to do with blossoming forth with brilliance and speed. That sounded like our day, too, - the quarreling, the holding of grudges and seeking of revenge and the way of those things just blossoming. I don't say these things to try to be negative, but for me, I thought, "Here we have this prophecy. The Lord has said, 'As I live, even so will I come in the last days, in the days of wickedness and vengeance.'" And I went and looked that up and I thought, "WOW! He's talking to us!" And, of course, I have felt that way before, and I have tried to share that with you before.

That doesn't mean all of us sitting here today will see that happen, but it could mean that. So, what should our response to that be? Maybe I should tell you what the three words were - the only three words I got that I felt like the Lord gave me. As I tried to prepare, for today, I thought He shared with me that I should share with you, these words, "The Lord Cometh!" Do we believe that? What will we do in response to it? For myself, I am not so concerned about what am I going to do like I have heard other people say, "Oh, we had better stockpile this or we better ...". I wonder what it means in terms of what am I going to do trying to be sure that other people know He's coming. Am I willing to try and realign my life somehow so that I spend more time sharing the message of Jesus Christ with my brothers and sisters? Do I really care about their souls? If I truly believe that the Lord cometh, and that He cometh quickly, how will I live the time that I have left?

The Time to Perform Has Come

There comes a time when our opportunity to prepare is past, and it's time to quit preparing and to perform. Friday night Jazmyn was part of a performance, and I don't have any idea how much preparation went into that, but obviously there was quite a bit, I think. It didn't look to me like it would be the thing you could just walk in and do unless, maybe Jazmyn is experienced and professional enough that she could do that. But it looked to me like the kind of thing that would take a lot of preparation and a lot of work. And if you think about things in which you are participating - (Our speaker turned to Lauren who was playing in Graceland's Christmas Carol) you are participating in the play right now, probably a lot of work - a lot of preparation. We could take time and I could let each one of you tell me what you do that requires a lot of

preparation. Maybe it's the classroom. Maybe it's getting the paper out. I know, Gordon, I have heard you talk about some of the things you have to do to comply with the law, and I am sure it takes a lot of preparation to figure out what that is, to put it together, get it presented so that it is meaningful to the people who are responsible for really complying. I could go around the room probably and pick on everybody, and you know what it means to prepare. You also know what it means to get up on that particular morning that this has to be done and say, "Okay, here we go!"

I've had that in my work. The one that comes to mind is going to the supreme court and having to argue a case. It scares me to death! So you prepare, and you prepare and prepare, and finally you get up and it's the morning you've got to do it! There's no more preparation. In one case I can remember in particular, when I arrived in Des Moines, I walked into the court house there at the capitol building, and went up to the floor the court room is on. I just wasn't sure I was going in! Maybe my client would just have to go on their own! And maybe they would have been just as well off if they had!

But that's where we are, I think, in terms of the Kingdom and the gospel and sharing the gospel with our fellowmen. We are rapidly, I would propose to you, approaching the point where time for preparation is past. I think it says that somewhere in the scriptures a long time ago. But we have come a long way since we were told that, and so we have to be nearing the time when we are going to do what we are going to do. What we don't do, we will have to account for.

What Has This to Do With Christmas?

Now, you are probably wondering how I got clear off there on approaching Christmas, but I think it all ties together. Christ knew that He was our only hope, and He knew what He had to do for us. And He did it! I don't think we have to look too far, when we look at our world conditions that exist, to understand that the souls of many of those around us will be lost if they do not hear somehow, the gospel of Jesus Christ. What are we willing to do to see that that gospel gets shared with those around us?

You know, when Christ was born, (and we have all heard the story a lot of times), He was born in a manger. Many of you are parents and grandparents. You have held the newborn. Remember what that was like? I wonder what it was like for Mary and Joseph to hold that child. If I read the scriptures correctly, Mary had some understanding, and Joseph did, too, that this child was special. But, then, perhaps, you could look at every child and know they are special. I thought about having all the kids come up here so you could look at them and realize how special each one is. In fact, I enjoyed your children being up here this morning because I was thinking about how special every child is. (The Michael and Julie Jordison family was in charge of the morning's family worship, and each child had a part.) But every person is special. They don't have to be children. Every person is special! But, you know, and here is where I wanted to go with that. Some of you have had the privilege to hold your children and grandchildren, maybe not even when they were born, but as they get a little older, too. We had some of our grandchildren out to the house yesterday, and they are no longer little, let alone newborns, but it's still special. Mary must have surely felt what I think most mothers must feel in terms of wanting to care for this child and provide for it - make sure that it was safe and secure.

Now we are looking at a little different perspective. Christ has told us He is returning to the earth, and He must surely look at each

one of us as His children, and long to hold us and to care for us - provide for us and to keep us secure. We know He does because He was willing to sacrifice His very life that we might have even the opportunity for salvation.

And so, this morning, I guess what I would like you to do is to consider how real God's love is - how much He wants to hold you in His arms - how much He wants to hold each one of His creation in His arms. And sometimes, we have to be the ones to initiate that process. Sometimes it is us that He desires to use to reach out that others can know to come unto Him and to allow Him to hold and to protect and provide for us all.

I looked up a whole bunch of other scriptures, too, that have to do with His calling us to be His sons and daughters - his friends. I won't go into those, He has done that. He was willing to take upon him the flesh - to be born - to suffer all that He suffered in the process of the crucifixion, and then to be risen again and to pay the price for all of our sins. I don't know about you, but when I say those words, I don't think I really comprehend them, but I would like to. And having done that, I guess the thing I would like to leave you with this morning is, His words are true, and they are sure. He said He is returning. He will return, and when He returns, He would like to be able to claim you, each one of you, as His children. He wants only the best for us. So, please, do not reject Christ, and do not be satisfied with the idea that those around you have rejected Him or are rejecting Him. I don't know if that makes sense to you, but somehow we need to be renewed. We need to be concerned about those around us and reaching out to them, even those who just make us mad, because every one of their souls is precious unto Christ, and He died for every one of us. He was born for every one of us. That's the time of year we are at, as far as celebrating. But He died for us. He was resurrected, and He will return!

“Priceless Imperfections”

Priest Gordon Winkler chose Luke 2:25-32 for his opening scripture December 17: “And behold, there was a man at Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came by the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child, even Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, Then took he 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.”

Brother Winkler first asked us who went home for Thanksgiving. Next he asked who is going home for Christmas. He then described the family Thanksgiving at Linda's family home: There were 37 people, four generations, gathered to share a wonderful holiday. The weather was great. So were the food, games, laughter, more food. Stephan, Heidi's boy friend was with them. He is an only child whose father came from Germany and whose mother is also an only child. A family gathering for his family is four people, so he was overwhelmed. Linda's father expressed how blessed he was to have a family that still wants to get together - not like some

families who don't get along and have to have a seating arrangement to make sure certain people do not sit next to certain others. The Winklers plan to go to Michigan for Christmas. My sister Daina and family are coming from England. We don't get to see them often. Karen's husband is bringing their two children for part of the time. They will spend Christmas day with his family. (Karen died of cancer.) There will be a hurried schedule and a crowded house. My parents' home is not very large. Brother Wayne called last night wishing he could be home at the same time but that is probably not possible.

It all reminds me of the song, "Home For the Holidays", especially the words of the first verse: "When you pine for the sunshine of a friendly gaze - for the holidays you can't beat home sweet home"; and of the second verse: "No matter how far away you roam, if you want to be happy in a million ways, for the holidays you can't beat home, sweet home."

Recently Paul Harvey was analyzing the comfort of being home for the holidays, He posed three questions, 1. Why do we long to be home?; 2. What is the attraction, even as adults to go home?; 3. Is there some kind of invisible thread that ties us to home? Paul's conclusion was, what draws us all home is "imperfections". "Priceless imperfections", he called them. (Then in Paul Harvey's inimitable way, our speaker quipped, "I'll be back in a moment with the rest of the story.")

Imperfections That We Remember

Imperfections of home bring back memories of happy times, friendly gazes, as the song says. Imperfections generate within us thoughts of what was good. They touch our spirits. So what is Paul Harvey talking about? What are "Priceless imperfections"? They are a squeaky floor board or stair step that alerts you that Mom or Dad will be coming to tell you to be quiet and go to sleep. A dent in the garage door, a result of the first time Dad let you drive the family station wagon. A piece of Plexiglas in the back door - not glass, which was broken several times while you were playing ball in the yard. A rusted basketball rim hanging from a weathered backboard. Scratched furniture from toy trucks and building blocks. The big mixing bowl with a chipped rim - the one you used when you made cookies with Mom. The tea kettle that doesn't whistle any more. A carpet stain. Remember you said you wouldn't spill? Don't you feel warm and comforted with the memories?

"Priceless imperfections" - I will add a few for myself and you can, too. For me there is the uneven floor between the utility room and the back room addition, which was the play area. The room heater that clanged as the temperature changed and the metal expanded or contracted. The hallway closet door always coming off the track - a sure sign someone was hiding there during a game of hide-and-seek. The bark scrapped off the front yard tree. I was "helping" Dad paint the house, and as he scraped moss and old loose paint off the siding, I scraped the bark off the tree.

Does God see us as "Priceless Imperfections?" As the creator of the world, does He see our imperfections, our sins, and still consider us priceless? I believe He does! John 3:16 says it: "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 wants us home with Him, not just for the holidays but for eternity! In Doctrine and Covenants 22:23b God tells Moses, "...and there is no end to my works, neither to my words; for this is my work and my glory, to bring to pass the immortality, and eternal life of man."

So God sent His son into the world to take upon Him our sins

so we can return home to be with our God and Creator. Simeon understood this as he held baby Jesus in his arms and exclaimed: "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."

Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul speak of heaven as home. Jesus, speaking with His disciples, makes this announcement, as recorded in John 14:2-6. "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And when I go, I will prepare a place for you, and come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, ye may be also." Jesus speaks of heaven as home, and He tells His disciples, "You know where I am going, and you know the way." Thomas protested, "We don't know where You are going, and how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, (Verse 6) "I am the way!"

Paul, addressing the saints at Corinth, expressed the comparison of an earthly house to a spiritual house. 2 Corinthians 4:18 is a sort of a preface to 2 Corinthians 5:1. together they read, "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that, if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

In chapter 5 of Second Corinthians, Paul continues to give great words of wisdom from verse 17 to 21. Verse 21 says: "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." Jesus' purpose was to be sin for us, and it was His choice!

The Christmas Story Begins in Genesis

The Christmas story really begins in Genesis 3. Genesis 3:1-5 tells the story: "And I, the Lord God, spake unto Moses, saying, That Satan whom thou hast commanded in the name of mine Only Begotten, is the same which was from the beginning; And he came before me, saying, Behold I, send me, I will be thy Son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore, give me thine honor.

"But behold, my beloved Son, which was my beloved and chosen from the beginning, said unto me: Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever. Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him; and also that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten I caused that he should be cast down; and he became Satan. Yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive, and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice."

Jesus, humbling Himself before the Father said, "Thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever."

A favorite quote of Rob Rolfe comes from 1 John, chapter 2, verse 2. I think he likes it because of the big word in it: "And he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

Jesus allowed Himself to be the atoning sacrifice offered to the world - God's only Son for your sins and mine. Accepting Jesus is more than verbalization - more than saying, "I believe". It is a visualization of a change in our lives - a change that affects our whole being. It has an impact on every thing we do, say and stand for.

But to accept Jesus as God has offered Him to us, we must want to change. There is an old joke about, "How many psychiatrists does

it take to change a light bulb? The answer is, “Just one if the light bulb really wants to change”.

Because of where I work, I’m aware of medical diagnosis that require big changes in people’s life styles. Most of us are aware of one of those diagnoses to our friend Matt - diabetes. Diabetes requires close monitoring of diet, exercise and medication. Those who continue to live a quality life have accepted the life style changes. One young man in our town did not. Diagnosed with diabetes, he refused to make the needed life style changes. One day there was an episode on the square in Mt. Ayr. He had a diabetic reaction and lost control of his car. It careened from one side of the street to another, off the street through the court house square, crashing into Linda’s vehicle and otherwise damaging his car and others. It was not long before his kidneys failed and he was the first patient to use a kidney dialysis machine at the hospital. And not too long after that, he died.

I have a friend and colleague who has smoked for over thirty years. He had made many attempts to quit. He has tried gum, patches, hypnosis. All failed. Now when I saw him recently he had been without a cigarette for two weeks. He said he had thought about smoking one as he made a long drive, and nobody would know, but he rejected the idea. I asked him why this time was different. He said the reason for the difference was, “I didn’t really want to stop before. This time I really want to stop!”

I hope you really want to change and accept Jesus as the one that can help you return into the presence of your God and Creator - the one who considers you to be priceless despite your imperfections.

For me, the Christmas story is one of humility, forgiveness and love. Jesus humbled Himself before His Father and said, “Thy will be done, and the glory be Thine forever!” And He chose to become forgiveness for our sins and those of the world. And God’s love for us is so great that He allowed the birth, death and resurrection of His only Son, Jesus Christ, so that we can come home for eternity.

I wish you all a blessed Christmas season. I will miss seeing you next Sunday. But I’ll be going home for the holidays!

By Faith We Know He Is the Son of God

The scripture Priest Nathan Smith chose for his opening scripture was Hebrews 11:1-6: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good report. Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear. By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and by it he being dead yet speaketh. By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him; for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”

After the choir sang, “Were You There”, with Nathan accompanying, he resumed his address with the greeting, “Merry Christmas. It’s wonderful to be with all of you and to share together in worship today.”

As I was preparing for our time together this morning, I was thinking of how a few weeks ago I was able to attend the performance of Handel’s Messiah at the Auditorium. It was a really good performance, and I really enjoyed it. I especially enjoyed reflecting on the words of scripture that are contained in that music and thinking about the prophecies that foretold Jesus’ coming so many years before His birth. I would like to share with you this morning, some of the scriptures that gave people hope for many years before Jesus was actually born - that He would come and that He would be born.

The Scriptures Prophecy of the Birth

We are going to start back in Genesis, Chapter 4:7-12. This is about the earliest reference to Jesus that I could find in the scriptures, after He did the work of creation. “And then the angel spake;”- the angel was talking to Adam - “saying, This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth; Wherefore, thou shalt do all that thou doest, in the name of the Son. And thou shalt repent, and call upon God, in the name of the Son for evermore.

“And in that day, the Holy Ghost fell upon Adam, which beareth record of the Father and the Son, saying, I am the Only Begotten of the Father from the beginning, henceforth and forever; that, as thou hast fallen, thou mayest be redeemed, and all mankind, even as many as will.

“And in that day Adam blessed God, and was filled, and began to prophesy concerning all the families of the earth; saying, Blessed be the name of God, for, because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again, in the flesh I shall see God. And Eve, his wife, heard all these things and was glad, saying, Were it not for our transgression, we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient. And Adam and Eve blessed the name of God; and they made all things known unto their sons and their daughters.”

So that’s something that happened, so far as we can tell from the scriptures, about four thousand years before Jesus came; yet those people had hope and had joy. Realizing the pain and the sorrow that had come because of their transgression and their fall; yet the prophecy of Jesus coming brought them hope and joy, even four thousand years ahead of time.

As we move through the scriptures, we can look through Isaiah, chapter 9:2-7. This is one of those that are in the Messiah. “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and increased the joy; and they joy before thee, according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire.

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there is no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.”

Again that was around maybe seven hundred years before

Jesus came, and yet that message of hope and that message of joy - how it increased the joy that brought hope to the people even seven hundred years before Jesus was born. And we think about the faith that it must have required for Isaiah to be talking about something that wouldn't happen for so many years into the future; yet he would make that proclamation.

We look at First Nephi, Chapter three. Now Nephi is a little bit closer to Christ's birth. Nephi was writing around six hundred years before Christ was born, maybe around a hundred years or so after Isaiah. Starting in verse 51: "And it came to pass that he said unto me, Look! and I looked as if to look upon him, and I saw him not; for he had gone from before my presence." (Now the "him" is the angel who was talking to Nephi here.) And it came to pass that I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth: and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white. And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me, Nephi, what beholdest thou? And I said unto him, A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins. And he said unto me, Knowest thou the condescension of God? And I said unto him, I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless I do not know the meaning of all things And he said unto me, Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.

"And it came to pass that I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; And after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time, the angel spake unto me, saying, Look! And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms. And the angel said unto me, Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!"

So there we have a very detailed prophecy given around six hundred years before Christ was born - a prophecy that would give hope, that would give confidence to Nephi and to all the people who would come after him, who would read his record who could look forward with faith knowing that that prophecy would be fulfilled. That was about six hundred years for Nephi. Going a little bit closer to Jesus' birth, we are looking at Micah. We are not really sure when Micah lived but probably maybe around five hundred years, was the best that I could find out. Five hundred years before Christ was when Micah was alive and in chapter five, verses 1 and 2 we read: "Now gather thyself in troops, O daughter of troops; he hath laid siege against us; they shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek. But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

Then turning back to the Book of Mormon. In Alma chapter five, verses 17-28: "But behold, the Spirit hath said this much unto me, saying: Cry unto this people, saying, Repent ye, repent ye and prepare the way of the Lord, and walk in his paths, which are straight: For behold, the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and the Son of God cometh upon the face of the earth.

"And behold, he shall be born of Mary at Jerusalem, which is the land of our forefathers, she being a virgin, a precious and chosen vessel, who shall be overshadowed, and conceive by the power of the Holy Ghost, and bring forth a son, yea, even the Son of God; And he shall go forth, suffering pains, and afflictions, and temptations of every kind; And this that the word might be fulfilled which saith, He will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people; and he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of

death which bind his people: And he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities."

Now that was a prophecy that was given maybe eighty to eighty five years before the birth of Christ, and the prophecies keep coming as we go through the scriptures. The last one I would like to share is one that is probably well known to you. Helaman Chapter 5, starting in verse 55-59: "And behold, he said unto them, Behold, I give unto you a sign: for five years more cometh, and behold, then cometh the Son of God to redeem all those who shall believe on his name. 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."

Birth of Christ, Real or Fantasy?

Now, all those people throughout the scriptures and throughout the years who read those prophecies believed that they would come to pass. But most of the people were not able to actually see that happen. They had faith and they trusted that the things that God had said to them would happen and that they would really be true in the real world. They had faith that it wasn't just a story but something that would actually happen. We can imagine the excitement that it must have been like for people like Simeon and Anna who were able to actually see the prophecies that they had hoped for and believed in for so many years come to pass right before their eyes. It was when Jesus was brought to the temple as a forty day old child and Simeon was able to see Him and to prophecy. And Anna, who had lived for so many years as a widow, had worshipped the Lord in the temple and had hoped for all of her life to be able to see that prophecy fulfilled. What a wonderful blessing that must have been for them. All of that faith and expectation was finally being fulfilled.

We can imagine what it must have been like for the Wise Men also who had faith to make a very long journey to go some place they didn't even really know where they were going and yet, when they got to Bethlehem, or to where Jesus was, they were able to see the fulfillment of that hope that they had had because of those prophecies.

Why God Gives Prophecies

The scriptures tell us that God makes prophecy - makes these things known to us because He loves us. In Alma, chapter 19:21-27 it talks a little bit about prophecy. It says, "And now, my son, I would say somewhat unto you concerning the coming of Christ. Behold, I say unto you, that it is he that surely shall come, to take away the sins of the world; yea, he cometh to declare glad tidings of salvation unto his people. And now my son, this was the ministry unto which ye were called, to declare these glad tidings unto this people, to prepare their minds; or rather that salvation might come unto them, that they may prepare the minds of their children to hear the word at the time of his coming.

"And now I will ease your mind somewhat on this subject.

Behold, you marvel why these things should be known so long beforehand. Behold, I say unto you, Is not a soul at this time as precious unto God, as a soul will be at the time of his coming? Is it not as necessary that the plan of redemption should be made known unto this people, as well as unto their children? Is it not as easy at this time, for the Lord to send his angel to declare these glad tidings unto us, as unto our children; or as after the time of his coming?"

The scriptures tell us that the Lord sends us these prophecies because His people are precious to Him. He wants them to know that Jesus will be coming so they can have faith so they can understand the plan of redemption. So these prophecies have been unfolded to us throughout the scriptures. But it took faith for those people to look forward and to believe that these things would really happen. You know we have the benefit of hindsight. We can see that Christ was born, but they didn't know exactly how it would happen. They couldn't read the accounts of what happened that we have in the scriptures. They had to have faith to believe. But if they did have that faith, that faith really was something that transformed their lives. And I think the best example of that, or one of the best examples also comes from the Book of Mormon. From Alma, chapter 14:33-43. It talks about the power that this faith in Jesus Christ through the prophecies had in the lives of those people.

"And now behold, my brethren, since it has been all that we could do, (as we were the most lost of all mankind,) to repent of all our sins and the many murders which we have committed, and to get God to take them away from our hearts, for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God, that he would take away our stain. Now my best beloved brethren, since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren: Behold, I say unto you, Nay, let us retain our swords, that they be not stained with the blood of our brethren: For perhaps if we should stain our swords again, they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins.

"And the great God has had mercy on us, and made these things known unto us, that we might not perish: Yea, and he has made these things known unto us beforehand, because he loveth our souls as well as he loveth our children; therefore in his mercy he doth visit us by his angels, that the plan of salvation might be made known unto us as well as unto future generations. O how merciful is our God!

"And now behold, since it has been as much as we could do to get our stains taken away from us, and our swords are made bright, Let us hide them away that they may be kept bright, as a testimony to our God at the last day, or at the day that we shall be brought to stand before him to be judged, that we have not stained our swords in the blood of our brethren since he imparted his word unto us, and has made us clean thereby."

I think you, hopefully, will recognize the story is of the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi who were willing to bury their swords and not even take them up in self defense. And the thing that gave them the power to do that was their faith in the message that had been revealed to them by the angel. And notice their great appreciation and gratitude for God's mercy in showing them those things so many years before hand. They had the faith. They knew it wouldn't happen for many years, but they still would exercise that faith to believe that it really would happen.

And we can think also of the story of the people as told in third Nephi who believed Samuel's prophecy and were willing to stake

their lives on that faith on what they believed would happen. They hadn't seen it yet, but they had faith in the prophecies that had been given - so much faith that they would be willing to risk their lives to say that they would not recant and deny the prophecies that had been given. They would not deny the hope they had because of Christ who would come.

It Also Takes Faith to Look Back

Now it took faith for those people to look forward into the future and see that Christ would come. But it also takes faith for us to day to look back into the past and to believe that the stories we have recorded here in the scriptures really did happen. You know there are many voices in the world today that would say that the things we have recorded for us in the scriptures are good, inspirational stories. There are good morals and good messages there on which we can draw; but maybe Jesus wasn't really born of a virgin. Or maybe He wasn't really resurrected, but there are still a lot of good things there in the scriptures for us. It's an idea that has been around, of course, for many, many years. It is not just an idea created in the twenty first century. It reminds me of the character in the opera, Porgy and Bess, who says, "It ain't necessarily so! Those things that you are liable to read in your Bible, it ain't necessarily so.

And really, if we think about it, we can't necessarily know for sure in ways that we can observe. I really think there are several different ways we can approach the scripture, especially the scriptures about Christmas and about Jesus being born of a virgin. It's not something that we see every day or something we have experienced in our lives - that a virgin could give birth to a child. But it is there in the scriptures; and one way we can approach it is to say that God is a miraculous God who intervenes in the world in special ways that are beyond what we can do with humans or beyond what we experience on a regular basis. Then we can assume that the stories and accounts that we find in the scriptures are basically factual - pretty much historical. We must recognize, of course, that the stories are written down by people, that translations have had to happen through human hands, and the copying and other things have happened over the years. We are not saying that every word is directly from God's mouth, like the Ten Commandments, which God directly wrote down. But still taking the approach that, as Nephi says in the Book of Mormon, if there are mistakes, they are mistakes of men, but believing that the basic facts are here - expecting that the stories that we read really did happen in the real world. If we take that approach, it gives us a certain picture of God who is above the world, who created the world, acts in the world. With this approach, we accept that those actions and those relationships happened with the writers of the scriptures. They recorded them, and we can read them for ourselves. So that picture kind of has God at the top, interacting directly with the writers, and we, as the readers are at the bottom.

But that's not the only way to look at scriptures. There are many different ways. If we don't believe that God exists, then that obviously has to change our picture of how we interpret the scriptures. If God doesn't exist, then a lot of those stories that are in the scriptures, also couldn't have happened because they are miraculous. We can find other explanations. Sometimes, maybe, we could find scientific coincidence that could explain some of the stories that are in the scriptures if God doesn't exist. Or certainly it is possible that many of the stories in the scriptures could just be tradition or fables that have just been passed down to us through many years of tradition. If that's the case, then the scriptures might

still be valuable as a source of wisdom, but they are not particularly more valuable than any other source of wisdom - any other tradition or any other work of art or any other philosophy, or any other thing we could come up with today. Just because they are old doesn't necessarily make them better. So that's one approach to scripture that is definitely out there in the world. I don't think it is the best one, but that is one that we can talk about and be aware of.

Another approach to scripture, I think comes somewhere in between the two and says, "Yes, God does exist. He's out there, but the stories of the scriptures that we have may or may not have happened. Some of them might have and some of them might have not, but the important question is not really what are the stories but what do the stories mean to us. Really, the interpretation is really the central thing and the lessons, the applications are what we are after out of the scriptures. So it doesn't really matter whether those stories happened or not. The question then really becomes, not what do the scriptures say, but what do the scriptures mean.

The problem is, if you go down that road too far, worrying about not what they say but what do they mean, sometimes we get to the point where the scriptures don't mean what they say anymore. We can go so far in our interpretation, when it is divorced and separated from reality that some of the most basic, simple things that are right there on the surface of the scriptures we overlook, or we throw out because it doesn't support the interpretation we are trying to make. If we separate the scriptures from reality or from history, instead of the picture of God acting down into the world and that relationship being recorded, the picture kind of gets flipped over and God is there - kind of around - but instead of the scriptures recording God's actions, it is more a record of man reaching out to God. And so the people who are writing take more center stage. The people who wrote the scriptures, rather than being recorders, are more authors of what is happening.

But the person who really takes center stage is the reader, because then it is up to the reader to sort out - there's God here. There's this person reaching out to God in their own understanding, from their own culture and their own experience. It's up to the reader, then, to interpret where is the divine spark in this? Where is the truth, and where are the feelings of the writer or the history or the background of the writer? How does that all fit together? It might be possible to sort those things out, but it is much more difficult, and, of course, you can't sort that out just using the scriptures as your basis. You have to use other external things to draw conclusions from - our experience, our philosophy, our other sources of "truth" where we might find them. Those are all necessary.

In fact, it is impossible to sort it all out if we say that the scriptures are not based on history. It is impossible for us to understand the scriptures without drawing in lots of other sources. And that selective sorting and deciding what sources to rely on to judge the validity of scripture - judging which parts of scriptures are real and which parts are not, eventually can tell us a lot about ourselves. It can tell us what we find important, which parts really speak to us. It's kind of like an ink blot. You know everybody can look at it and find something different in it that tells us about that person. It tells us their interpretation and where they are coming from, but, in the end, it doesn't tell us so much about God.

We Chose By Faith

So we are faced, then, with these choices to decide. Did these stories in the scripture really happen. Are they based on history? Was there really a virgin named Mary? Did she really travel to

Bethlehem with Joseph? Or was there naught? Is it just a good story for us? And these answers are not going to come to us necessarily through reason or through observation. There is no CSI team that is going to dig up the forensic evidence to prove one way or another because we are at such a great distance in time from the event. We are much farther away than even Isaiah was from the birth of Christ. We are farther away, almost as far as anyone in the scriptures except for the very earliest part of the Old Testament. We are farther away than anybody in the Book of Mormon was, except for the Jaredites. We are really at a great distance. So I don't think that we are going to find any smoking gun -- any hard evidence. I don't think even through our reasoning powers that we are going to be able to find definitive proof that Jesus really was the Son of God -- that He really was born of a virgin. This is something that we have to come to realize through faith -- through exercising our faith. And the scriptures give us the directions on how we can exercise our faith. We don't have to buy into the whole "Three in One" - all of the books all at once. We can just start with a seed. Start with a little experiment, and I think one of the best experiments - the best places to start is to start by believing that Jesus was the Son of God - that He was born of a virgin. I think so because if we do, then through faith in Christ we can find, not just a teacher, but we can find a Savior.

We all live in the real world, and we need, not just a teacher, but we need a Savior who came to the real world. We need a Savior because in our fallen state, we don't have the ability to do the things that we know that we should. Even if we knew all of the great teachings - even if we knew all of the right way to do things and all the moral precepts and plans and everything was laid out and we understood it from some great teacher, who may or may not have lived, we are naturally - in our natural state are an enemy to God. So even if we could understand everything that we should do, we just don't do it - at least not all of the time. But in Jesus the word was made flesh. He came into the world. These ideas, the precepts, the prophecies, the teachings - just like it says on the cover of our bulletin, the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. He came down to be, in the real world, all of those things that we know that we should be. Because He came down into the real world and really died, we can really be forgiven those things that we do that we know we should not do when we don't follow His teachings - when we listen to the voices to whom we know we should not listen. We are able to make a change. We are able to be forgiven because we have not just a teacher. We have a Savior.

Doctrine and Covenants, section 90:4b says: "Ye were also in the beginning with the Father; that which is Spirit, even the Spirit of truth; and truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come; and whatsoever is more or less than this, is the spirit of that wicked one, who was a liar from the beginning."

The truth that we find in the scriptures is truth that is knowledge of things as they really were, and also knowledge of things as they are, and as they are to come. Through faith in Jesus Christ we find a source of truth that we can trust. It is honest. It is reliable. We find a source of truth that is beyond our own understanding - beyond our own reasoning - our own ideas - our own background - our own predisposed opinions - beyond our own experience - truth that really exists - that is really there. And through that faith, our lives can be transformed. If we really have faith in Jesus Christ - not just as a story but as a real Son of God - as a real being, then our priorities are changed. The things that the world tells us are important are

often less important. Our stewardship of all of our lives, our time, and our talents must be different if we really have faith and believe that Jesus was a real person in the real world, because as real people in the real world, we then have a responsibility to Jesus. It is not just an intellectual exercise. It's something that has to do with the way that we live every day.

The scriptures tell us that faith is the first step to repentance. Because Jesus really did come, and He really was born, we can repent and change those things in our lives that we know keep us back. Because of the hope of Christmas, we know that new life is really possible. We can have hope that as we face the challenges that are around us as we go into the new year, we will do it with faith in Jesus and, just like the people in the Old Testament, look forward with faith to the fulfillment of those prophecies. We can look backward knowing that Christ came, and we can look forward with faith, knowing that He will come again.

Music Service Honors Christ and Celebrates His Birth

Under the direction of High Priest Robert Rolfe and accompanied by Cessaries Galusha at the piano, the service was opened by singing hymn 463, "O Jesus, I have Promised to Serve Thee to the end. Be Thou forever near me, my Master and my Friend. I shall not fear the battle if Thou art by my side, nor wander from the pathway if Thou wilt be my Guide." Brother Rolfe offered the invocation, and we sang hymn 433, "Faith of our Fathers living still in spite of dungeon, fire and sword. Oh, how our hearts beat high with joy when we hear that glorious word! Faith of our Fathers, holy faith. We will be true to Thee 'til death." The tithes and offerings were accepted by Priests Kent Clisby and Gordon Winkler.

Rob Rolfe sang, accompanied by his guitar, of the incomparable blessings our Lord and Savior brought with Him when He came to earth to minister. He then taught the congregation to sing the chorus with him. We sang, over and over again, "I will rejoice and praise the name of Jesus. To praise Him brings joy to my soul!" Brother Rolfe sang the verses and we joined on the chorus.

The Galusha family gave the next offering of music. Yvonne and Aquila played guitars, Gabel played the violin, and Cessaries and Jazmyn joined their mother in a beautiful trio of song, singing, "Thank You, O my Father, for Giving Us Your Son. There is a Redeemer, Jesus, God's own Son. Precious Lamb of God, Messiah, here once, and leaving us your Spirit 'til the work is done.

"Jesus, my Redeemer, name above all names, precious Lamb of God Messiah, hope for sinners slain. When I stand in glory, I will see His Face. Then I will serve my King forever in that holy place." (The entire offering was a beautiful and intricate arrangement of the song. We regret that only those who were present will be permitted to hear it because our recording attempt failed again.)

The Michael Jordison family was called next. Samuel played "The First Noel" on his violin. Then he was joined by Gabel Galusha playing a violin duet. Michael, accompanied by his mother, Jan at the piano followed, with a tenor solo. "I am finding myself at a loss for words. The funny thing is that it's OK. The last thing I need is to be heard, but to hear what You would say. Word of God, Speak. Would you pour down like rain, washing my eyes

to see Your majesty - to be still, to know that You are in this place. Please let me stay and rest in Your Holiness. Word of God, Speak! I am finding myself in the midst of You - beyond the music, beyond the noise. All that I need is to be with you and in the quiet hear Your voice. Word of God, Speak!

After finishing the solo, Michael took up his guitar and led the congregation in the old favorite, "Just a Closer Walk With Thee." Michael sang the verses, a plea for strength from a strong Lord to help us in our weakness to avoid the snares and keep us from all wrong. We were invited to sing along on the chorus. "Just a Closer Walk with Thee. Gracious Savior, let it be. Daily walking close to Thee. Let it be, oh, Lord, let it Be!"

The Barber family was next. There were three families represented in their offering. Mike and Karen Barber with their three sons, Jacob, John and Carter, Christie and David Bentley and daughter Sarah, and Chad and Debbie Morton with their little one. With Jacob at the piano and John on the guitar, the boys played, "Away in A Manger". Christie Bentley accompanied her daughter, Sarah playing "We Three Kings of Orient Are" on her violin. Then John, Jacob and Sarah were joined by Carter Barber and accompanied by Christie Bentley at the piano, singing, "Joy to the World". Debbie Morton, accompanied by Christie sang, the haunting Shepherd's song as the little shepherd asks the man of wealth, living in a palace, if he sees, hears and knows what the little Shepherd boy sees, hears and knows from that evening on the hills outside Bethlehem., "Do You See What I see?" and he describes the wonder of the experience as he sees the angels, hears the good news and sees the baby in a manger.

Cessaries played Scarletti's Sonata to end the special offerings. Joyously we sang Hymn 493, "Sent Forth with God's Blessing our true faith confessing, the people of God from His dwelling take leave." and were dismissed with a benediction pronounced by Elder Gerald Bolingbroke.

News & Notes

We Have a Problem

In our congregation there are at least three people who are seriously allergic to perfumes - so seriously that they have to leave the building when they come near it. Please consider their welfare when preparing for church activities.

Incidentally, these perfume allergies are the reason we do not use air fresheners anywhere in the building.

Harold Akers Dies

The sudden and unexpected death of Harold Akers has shocked and saddened the congregation. Harold suffered a heart attack at his home in Kellerton during the early morning hours of December 26 and was pronounced dead after being taken to the Decatur County Hospital in Leon. Harold was only 55 years of age and leaves behind his wife, Cathy of Kellerton, one son, Michael, of Cambridge, Iowa, Michael's wife Rachel and their sons Zach, Corey and Isaac.

The funeral service, held at the Slade-O'Donnell funeral home at Leon, was conducted by High Priest Robert Rolfe and Elder Alan Smith, with Jan Jordison the pianist. Burial was in the Rose Hill Cemetery at Lamoni. The congregation provided a lunch for the family at the Lamoni Community of Christ

Youth Serve

Cessaries Galusha has been accepted in several music conservatories in Europe where she hopes to further her music education after she is graduated by the University of Missouri. Her specialty is piano performance.

The Galusha family provided ministry of music for the Christmas Tea held annually at Liberty Hall at Lamoni. Their service was scheduled for half an hour or so, but Jazmyn was brought back to play on the pump organ beyond their allotted time.

Heidi Winkler's basketball team is playing in Florida during the early holidays. Heidi is being played carefully as she recovers from a concussion suffered in an earlier game.

Lauren Smith played the parts of both Scrooge's sister and Martha Cratchet in Graceland's A Christmas Carol.

Cede Smith played the piano in a Christmas celebration at Crown Colony.

The Congregation Goes Caroling

Baskets of fruit were delivered to a number of elderly and shut-ins on Sunday evening, December 17 as about thirty of the congregation caroled for those to whom they went. They also included the Lamoni Nursing and Rehab Center, in which three of our number reside, in their singing ministry. With the singing finished, all assembled at the Gerald and Patricia Bolingbroke home to eat supper together.

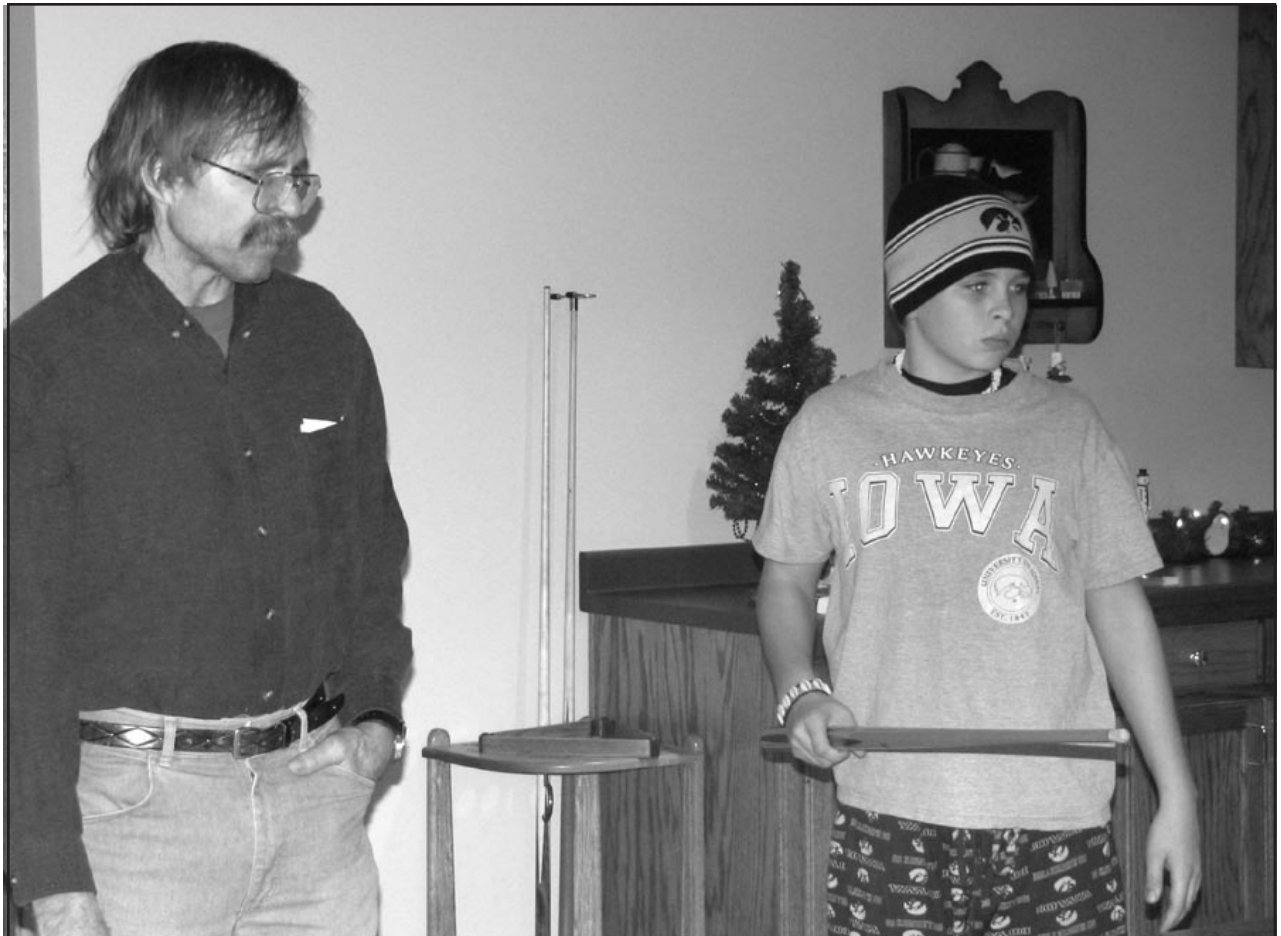
Ministry At Arkoe Continues

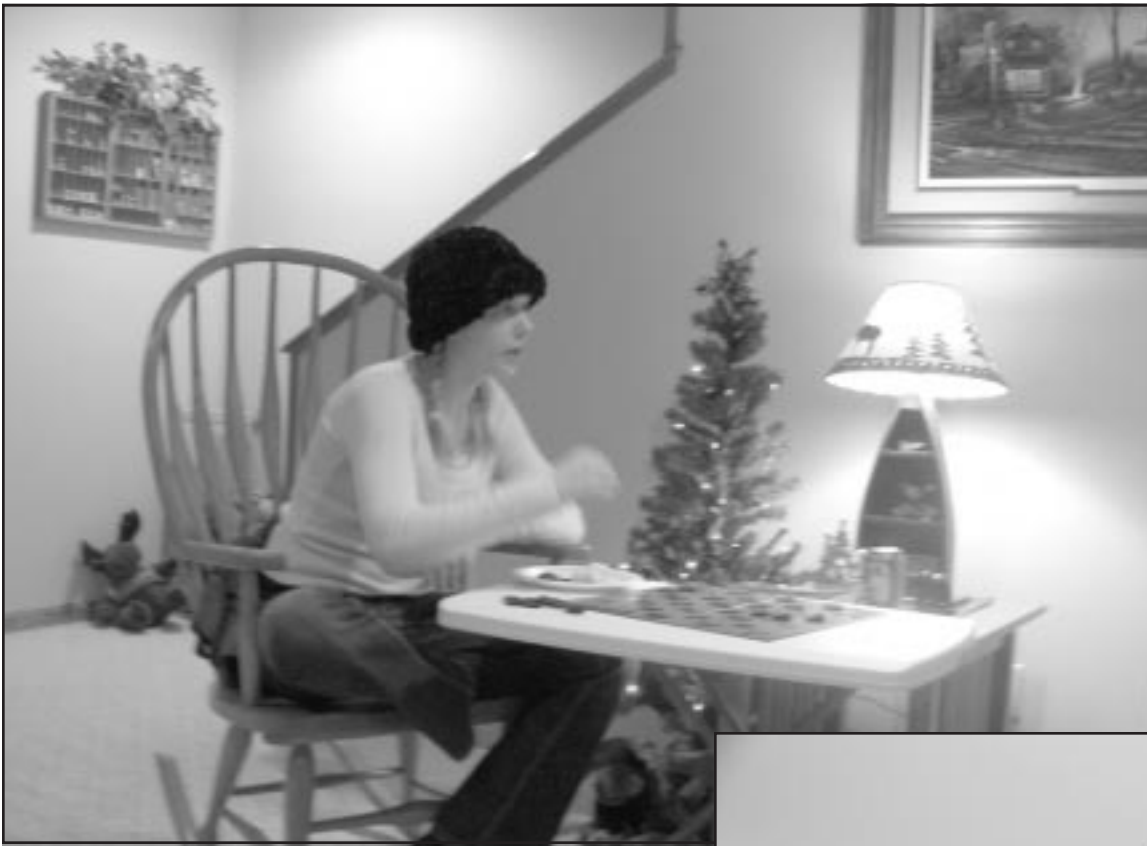
The Mount Ayr congregation has plans to assist with ministry in the Arkoe, Missouri congregation for some time in the future. That congregation has been under the leadership of Elder Steven Smith until his recent move to Warrensburg. Now Mount. Ayr has agreed to furnish ministry each Sunday for one month, as have several Missouri congregations. Some time ago Seventy Ronald Smith gave ministry there. December 17 Elder Michael Jordison and family, including his mother Jan, made the 150 plus round trip to preach, teach and give ministry of music to that fledgling congregation. The full month of service is scheduled for April 2007.

Christmas Service Ministers

Eighty one worshippers gathered in the sanctuary for the Christmas service on Sunday, December 24. Jan Jordison was the pianist offering the prelude for the morning. Other offerings comprising the prelude included the Galusha string trio playing "Silent Night". Aquila played the guitar, Jazmyn the first violin and Gable the second. Cheryl Phipps' class of children gave a Christmas reading concerning the shepherds at Jesus' birth. Vi Manzanara sang, "O Holy Night", and the congregation sang "Angels We Have Heard on High" before the invocation. Following the invocation and the reading of the opening scripture by our speaker, Priest Nathan Smith of Independence, Missouri, the choir, augmented by numerous voices which were among the worshippers, sang the beautiful Christmas hymn, "Were You There?"

Find the full report of the sermon in the body of this newsletter. After the sermon, Aquila and Jazmyn sang the lovely Spanish Christmas lullaby, "A la nanita nana" with Aquila accompanying on the guitar, and the congregation sang "Joy to the World!" before the benediction pronounced on a service filled with inspiration and truth.





New Year's Eve
Party at Winklers

Happy 2007!

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

News and Notes

Music Service Shows Enrichment of Talent

Our hats are off to the many young people in the congregation who are taking the time and making the effort to develop the skills that make ministry with their musical talent possible. See the report of the music service in the body of this Newsletter.

Rex Lin Marries

Saturday, December 30, Rex Lin was married to Dora Hsu in Taiwan. The entire congregation was invited to the wedding, but

since it was so far away, only Ronald and Di Smith and Rex's brother, Titus, made the journey for the occasion.

In addition to attending the wedding, Ron and Di have scheduled a number of ministerial activities. Ron will be preaching for the Saints. They will be visiting with former Graceland students who have returned to their native land, visiting in the homes of the Saints and otherwise giving ministry during the three weeks they plan to remain.