

Church of Jesus Christ Mount Ayr Restoration Branch

Newsletter January 2008

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NEWS AND NOTES

Congregational Caroling Party

On December 9th approximately 27 brave souls ventured out in the nasty weather to go to Jennifer and Bob Rowland's house for our annual caroling party. Because of the weather we did not go out caroling but stayed in where it was warm. We had a good time eating all the food that was prepared and visiting with each other. We ended the evening singing Christmas carols accompanied by Ron Smith on his guitar. Everyone had a great time, but we were sorry that the Mount Ayr people and others were not able to join us because of the weather conditions

Christmas Cantata

On the evening of December 16th, 28 people joined together at the church to sing "Born a Savior, Born a King", a cantata by John Purifoy, directed by Jan Jordison. After the cantata, the congregation was invited to sing Christmas carols. Those singing in the cantata came from the Mount Ayr, Lamoni and Leon communities, Creston and Marshalltown, Iowa and Independence and Buckner, Missouri. Interestingly, four different restoration denominations were represented. The church was beautifully decorated in blue and silver by Sue Beck and Kathy Myers. Linda and Heidi Winkler provided punch and many wonderful goodies. They were joined by Debbie Bastow in serving refreshments after the performance. Many lingered to visit. It was a lovely way to celebrate the birth of our Savior.

New Year's Eve Party

Our New Year's Eve party at the home of Rob and Lynda Rolfe was very well attended. Approximately 55 people of all ages braved the cold and snow to come and celebrate the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008. Almost everyone was still there to count down the seconds until the new year. Everyone seemed to enjoy all of the good food, fellowship and game playing.

Gerry Bolingbroke Dies

Gerry Bolingbroke passed away Dec. 11. Gerry was a member of the Mount Ayr Restoration Branch for over twenty years and served as branch treasurer for most of that time. He used his background in science to help people understand God's creation. He will be greatly missed, and our thoughts and prayers are with his family.

Winter Weather Causes Cancellations

Church was cancelled two Sundays during December due to ice and snow, thus shortening our newsletter. Many of our members were without electricity for as much as a week. Members pitched in to help and opened their homes to one another. In the end, despite the inconvenience and damage to trees, we thanked God for his protection and the beauty of the icy landscape.

Do we need God enough?

Norman Nelson, speaking

Michael Jordison welcomed the congregation and gave the invocation. As a call to worship, he read from Psalms 8:1-4 8:1 "O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens. Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger. When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" I would like for us to consider that call to worship. I don't want to take time away from communion or our speaker, but I felt that one of the things we need to consider this morning is, who is God that we are mindful of Him?

To answer that question I would like to turn to Ether in the Book of Mormon. You might recall that many, many years ago the people had become so wicked. They had failed to respond to God and repent so he wiped them away with a flood. There were eight people upon the Ark that made it through the flood and from those eight people the rest of the earth was repopulated. God told them that they should go out and be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. They refused to do that. They built a tower, a great tower as the Book of Mormon calls it. We often call it the Tower of Babel. They wanted to build a tower to get to heaven in case there was another flood that they might be able to escape. The Lord was displeased because they failed to follow his command to disperse and replenish the earth so He confounded their language and changed it into many languages so that the people could not understand each other; they could not work on the tower any more.

One of the families living in that city at that time was the Brother of Jared who had a brother named Jared. Jared came to his brother and told him that their languages were changing. He wanted his brother to pray to the Lord that He would not change their language so that they could still communicate and talk as a family. The brother of Jared did so and the Lord heard his prayer. He didn't change their language so that family was able to communicate. God led them out of the city and into the wilderness where eventually they came to a sea shore. God told them that he had a choice land prepared for them, a land which He had saved for the righteous. He wanted them to build ships so that they could sail across the sea to the choice land which the Lord wanted to give them. They built the ships which the Book of Mormon says were tight like a dish and there were no windows in them. The people were afraid that they wouldn't have light as they sailed across the sea. It says that they sailed about a year.

The Brother of Jared had a little conversation with the Lord. He told the Lord that they wouldn't be able to see as they traveled across the ocean, they would be in the dark in the ships. The Lord asked him what he wanted Him to do. It says the Brother of Jared went to the mountain and molten out 16 small stones from the earth. Then he spoke to the Lord and said, "And I know, O Lord, that thou hast all power, and can do whatsoever thou wilt for the benefit of man; therefore touch these stones, O Lord, with thy finger, and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness: and they shall shine forth unto us in the vessels which we have prepared, that we may have light while we shall cross the sea. Behold, O Lord, thou

canst do this. We know that thou art able to shew forth great power, which looks small unto the understanding of men. And it came to pass that when the Brother of Jared had said these words, behold, the Lord stretched forth his hand and touched the stones, one by one, with his finger; And the vail was taken from off the eyes of the Brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord; and it was as the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood; and the Brother of Jared fell down before the Lord, for he was struck with fear. And the Lord saw that the Brother of Jared had fallen to the earth; and the Lord said unto him, Arise, why hast thou fallen? And he saith unto the Lord, I saw the finger of the Lord, and I feared lest he should smite me; for I knew not that the Lord had flesh and blood. And the Lord said unto him, Because of thy faith thou hast seen that I shall take upon me flesh and blood; and never has man come before me with such exceeding faith as thou hast; for were it not so, ye could not have seen my finger. Sawest thou more than this? And he answered, Nay, Lord, shew thyself unto me. And the Lord said unto him, Believest thou the words which I shall speak? And he answered, Yea, Lord, I know that thou speakest the truth, for thou art a God of truth, and canst not lie. And when he had said these words, behold the Lord shewed himself unto him, and said, Because thou knowest these things, ye are redeemed from the fall; therefore ye are brought back into my presence; therefore I shew myself unto you. Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters. And never have I shewed myself unto man whom I have created, for never has man believed in me as thou hast. Seest thou that ye are created after mine own image? Yea, even all men were created in the beginning, after mine own image. Behold this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; and man have I created after the body of my spirit; and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit, will I appear unto my people in the flesh.' (Ether 1:66-81)

Who is God that we should be mindful of Him? The Brother of Jared received a revelation of who that God is and he says, "Yea, I know that thou speakest the truth, for thou art a God of truth, and canst not lie." God is a God of truth. He never changes and though our perceptions might change and though our understanding of Him might change, He is always constant. He is always there and no matter what we have done or where we have gone or what we have not done that we should be doing, God is always there for us.

Just a little bit after the flood, God made a covenant with Noah. It says in the 9th chapter of Genesis, "I will set my bow in the cloud; and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember my covenant, which I have made between me and you, for every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh." (Genesis 9:19-20)

Now do you think the people at the Tower of Babel would have built that tower if they would have believed this testimony of the everlasting covenant? "And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant, which I made unto thy father Enoch; that, when men should keep all my commandments, Zion should again come on the earth, the city of Enoch which I have caught up unto myself. And this is mine everlasting covenant, that when thy posterity shall embrace the truth, and look upward, then shall Zion look downward, and all the heavens shall shake with gladness, and the earth shall tremble with joy; And the general assembly of the church of the firstborn shall come down out of heaven, and possess the earth, and shall have place until the end come. And this is mine everlasting covenant, which I made with thy father Enoch." (Genesis 9:21-23) When thy posterity shall embrace the God of truth and look upward, then shall Zion look downward.

How much do we need God?

Our speaker Norman Nelson read from Micah 6:8. "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" How many of you would like to have the experience of the Brother of Jared, to be able to see your God and to have the faith and trust to believe in Him? You can. When you need Him enough to do all the things He asks of you, you will be able to see Him, to trust Him and to know Him for what He is. When you need Him enough to keep His commandments, to love Him and to want to be with Him, you can be with Him.

When Arladine died, I was alone and in very deep distress. I needed Him. I have told you about my experiences where I went to a meeting and the other elders that were there were signing up to go here and there or to do certain things. I just put the paper in my pocket and said, "I can't do that." On the way home I said, "If there is something else that you want me to do, I will do it." The next morning I had a call from Ms. DeTray who asked me to go to Honduras with them the next Friday. They had had a flood down there and needed doctors. I told her I didn't have a passport and couldn't do it. Jesus said to me, "You promised" in an audible voice. Well, I had my passport, all my shots and everything I needed by Thursday to go to Honduras. When you promise, keep your promise and He will make everything possible. He won't let you down.

It is very important to keep His commandments, study, fast and pray.

When I was in Nigeria one night I had a dream and I saw my Lord in that dream. He said to me, "Come and drink of the waters of life freely. Study the Scriptures and do those things which you learned of me. I am here for you. Learn of me. Keep my commandments." You know I was very surprised because when I saw Jesus; He didn't have on a white robe. Then I realized that dirty, speckled robe that He was wearing was mine. He had forgiven me and He called me to keep His commandments and to come unto Him. That he is the same thing that He asks you today. He will take your dirty, spotted robe and give you His and His love. Keep my commandments. Search my Scriptures. Be my person. Need me! Need me! We need to know that in our present state we cannot see Him, we cannot be with Him, we cannot have the blessings He tries to give us. Study, pray, fast, need Him. Know that you need Him and that He needs you.

From Section 10:6-7b of the Doctrine and Covenants, "And now, verily, verily I say unto thee, Put thy trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good; yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously; and this is my Spirit. Verily, verily I say unto you, I will impart unto you of my Spirit, which shall enlighten your mind, which shall fill your soul with joy, and then shall ye know, or by this shall you know, all things whatsoever you desire of me, which is pertaining unto things of righteousness, in faith believing in me that you shall receive." Study, pray and seek to be with Him and He will be with you. You can't even imagine the joy and the wonder of seeing and being with your God.

He is a God of truth, a God of wonder, a God of love and justice.

You know in the scriptures several places it says that the people were told that they couldn't tell anybody. Well, you can't. I can't tell you how wonderful it is. Words don't exist, for me at least, that I can tell you what joy there is, what wonder there is in being with your God. Whatever it takes you can't do enough that the blessings He gives you won't far outdistance anything you can imagine. He is a God of truth, a God of wonder, a God of love and a God of justice. We need to repent and earnestly seek to be with Him. His mercy extends to those who need Him, who seek Him, who seek diligently to be His children. His mercy is what we are asking for, His love and His mercy and that He freely gives if we seek Him diligently.

Can you imagine how wonderful it will be when we keep all of His commandments and look upward and can be with the church of the first born and share with them in a joy and a love of being with

God? Can you imagine how wonderful that will be? That's the promise He gave as Mike just read to you. When you people, as a people, will keep all commandments and look upward and trust in God that will happen. He doesn't lie. He said it will. All we have to do is believe it and do what He says. "...and he that liveth in righteousness, shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye; and the earth shall pass away so as by fire; and the wicked shall go away into unquenchable fire; and their end no man knoweth, on earth, nor ever shall know, until they come before me in judgment. . . . Be sober. Keep all my commandments. Even so. Amen." (D & C 43:7d-g, 8c)

Can we be silent any more about our knowledge of God?

Let's look at the third book of Nephi. Of course, I would also recommend reading the 19th chapter of Alma where he gives us all the information we need about right and wrong and the covenants God made with us. "And thus commandeth the Father that I should say unto you, At that day when the Gentiles shall sin against my gospel, and shall reject the fullness of my gospel, and shall be lifted up in the pride of their hearts above all nations, and above all the people of the whole earth, and shall be filled with all manner of lyings, and of deceits, and of mischiefs, and all manner of hypocrisy, and murders, and priestcrafts, and whoredoms, and of secret abominations; And if they shall do all these things, and shall reject the fullness of my gospel, behold, saith the Father, I will bring the fullness of my gospel from among them; And then will I remember my covenant which I have made unto my people, O house of Israel, and I will bring my gospel unto them." (3 Nephi 7:34-36) Think of the misery of all the people around us that don't know and trust God. Can we be silent and let all those friends of ours not know about God, not know the joy of knowing Him? Can we be silent any longer? Isn't it time we begin to know God well enough ourselves to teach His covenants and commandments to our friends that they can share with us in the joy of being with Him?

"And it came to pass that when Jesus had thus spoken, he cast his eyes round about again on the multitude, and beheld they were in tears, and did look steadfastly upon him, as if they would ask him to tarry a little longer with them. And he said unto them, Behold, my bowels are filled with compassion towards you: Have ye any that are sick among you, bring them hither. Have ye any that are lame, or blind, or halt, or maimed, or leprous, or that are withered, or that are deaf, or that are afflicted in any manner, bring them hither, and I will heal them, for I have compassion upon you; And it came to pass that when he had thus spoken, all the multitude, with one accord, did go forth, with their sick, and their afflicted, and their lame, and with their blind, and with their dumb, and with all they that were afflicted in any manner; and he did heal them every one as they were brought forth unto him; And they did all, both they who had been healed, and they who were whole, bow down at his feet, and did worship him; And as many as could come, for the multitude, did kiss his feet, insomuch that they did bathe his feet with their tears. And it came to pass that he commanded that their little children should be brought. So they brought their little children and sat them down upon the ground round about him, and Jesus stood in the midst; and the multitude gave way till they had all been brought unto him. And it came to pass that when they had all been brought, and Jesus stood in the midst, he commanded the multitude that they should kneel down upon the ground. And it came to pass that when they had knelt upon the ground, Jesus groaned within himself, and saith, Father, I am troubled because of the wickedness of the people of the house of Israel. And when he had said these words, he himself also knelt upon the earth, and behold he prayed unto the Father, and the things which he prayed, can not be written, and the multitude did bear record who heard him. And after this manner do they bear record; the eye hath never seen, neither hath the ear heard, before, so great and marvelous things as we saw and heard Jesus speak unto the Father; And no tongue can speak, neither can there be written by any man, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things as we both saw and

heard Jesus speak; And no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls at the time we heard him pray for us unto the Father." (3 Nephi 8:5-7, 9-19) It's impossible to know how wonderful it can be to be with your God. Is it worth the effort to do what you need to do to be there, starting today?

Rob Rolfe closed the service with the benediction. "Father in heaven, we come before you now as we have eaten and drunk the body and flesh of your son, Jesus Christ. This is how we take upon us that life and goodness that comes through the atonement that was made for us. Father, we pray now that as we look ahead during this month where we have so many social things to do and occasions that our hearts will be softened and we will be able to really understand what it means to come here on the first Sunday of the month and to share in this meal. Father, we pray that our robes will be washed white through the blood of your son, Jesus Christ, and that we would always take His name upon us and remember Him. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen."

Surprised by the Truth

Alan Smith, speaking

Gordon Winkler welcomed the congregation. He read Isaiah 12:1-6 as a call to worship and offered the opening prayer.

For a scripture reading this morning, I would like to read a few verses from three different spots in the book of Luke. "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. . . ." (Luke 1:11-13) "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." (Luke 1:28-30) "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." (Luke 2:8-10)

When you get as old as I am and you try and come up with a Christmas sermon to look at the Christmas story from another point of view, it kind of becomes a challenge. I have been thinking the past few weeks of what I could say this morning. When I was working on the part of Mom's funeral that I was supposed to share in, I tried to sum up the testimony of Christ in terms of truth. I wrote something down as I was doing that--the thought kind of came to me, and I wrote it down before I really thought it through myself. I don't know if you have ever had that experience where you write something down and say, "Wow!"

I have other kinds of experiences where I'm surprised by what I write, too. I was trying to write the school board story last week. It was about 11:30 pm and I was trying to explain that the school board was wanting to lower the ceiling and put insulation in the bus barn. Instead of the bus barn, I found myself typing in the Walter Reed Army Hospital, so I knew it was time to go to bed. Those were some words coming to me that didn't make any sense, but I think maybe the following ones do.

This is what I put together for Mom's funeral. "The central truth that we proclaim is that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. There were miracles at His birth. **He lived a life of always surprising those around Him with the truth.** He took upon Himself our sin and suffering so that there is nothing in this earth that we can feel that He can't console us in. He died for us. He rose from the dead. He calls us to His kingdom and He will return."

The phrase that I wrote that jumped out at me again was, “He lived a life of always surprising those around Him with the truth.” I think as we look at the Christmas story, we find over and over again examples of people being surprised by the truth. If you look at Jesus’ ministry, we could write a book about the experiences of people being surprised by the truth, and I want to share some of those experiences leading up through Jesus’ birth as we talk about the Christmas story today and challenge you to look at some others as you think about Jesus and His life.

When we talk about surprise there are many synonyms in the scriptures. We don’t have the word surprise used very often in the scriptures, if any. We don’t have the internet because of the ice storm so I couldn’t do my scripture search on the word surprise but astonishment, amazement, wonder, marvel, unprepared, startled, unexpected, troubled are all words that help express this same feeling of surprise that the scriptures use. In the story of Christ’s birth we find many examples, and I shared a few of those as I was reading the scripture to you this morning.

Zacharias and Elizabeth’s surprise

I would like to begin with the story of Zacharias and Elizabeth. You know Zacharias and Elizabeth were older. Elizabeth was barren and the scriptures say they were well stricken in years. I guess the older you get the more you understand what well stricken in years might mean instead of just getting older. Zacharias was burning incense in the temple when he was surprised by an angel. Zacharias’ response to seeing an angel appear to him by the altar was fear and being troubled it says. That’s our word for surprise at this moment. He was troubled and fear fell upon him but something even more surprising was what the angel had to say. He said, Zacharias, you know that prayer that you and Elizabeth have prayed for years? Of course Zacharias knew what he was talking about. The angel said, Elizabeth is going to have a baby and you are going to name him John. You will have joy and gladness and rejoice at his birth. He was told his son would be filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother’s womb. His ministry would be to turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord and make a people ready for the coming of the Lord. Zacharias’ response was, maybe you have the wrong person. I am old and my wife is barren. This can’t happen. My wife is stricken in years. He was so surprised the Lord struck him dumb. Another word for surprise and amazement could be dumbfounded, literally in this case. He wasn’t allowed to speak again until it had all come true. The people who were outside waiting marveled or were surprised at how long it was taking him to do the normal priestly function that he was his to do. As he came out he couldn’t speak, but they could perceive, by looking at him, that he had had a vision. So Zacharias had a big surprise. He was surprised by the truth that the Lord would bless him and Elizabeth after all the years, after all those prayers; that what they had prayed for was actually going to happen. Elizabeth didn’t tell anyone about her pregnancy for the first six months. About that time someone else was in for a surprise.

Mary’s surprise

An angel appeared to Mary and told her that she was a chosen one, blessed among women. I don’t know about you, but I could imagine that if the angel had come to me and told me I was blessed among men, I would say, “What do you mean, I am just me. What are you talking about?” Mary also was surprised. The scriptures say that she was troubled and pondered in her heart what kind of a salutation this was. Why would the angel say this to her? The angel told Mary that she would conceive the Son of the Highest. The Lord God would give him the throne of his father David. He would have a kingdom of which there would be no end. Mary’s reply was still surprise. “How can this be?” Mary was told by the angel that this would be accomplished by the power of the Holy Ghost and the power of the Highest. As a sign, she was told that Elizabeth was pregnant, something that Elizabeth hadn’t shared. “For with God nothing is impossible,” the angel said. After all these surprises, Mary finally said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me

according to thy word.” You can imagine that after Mary is told that she is going to have a child, how important it would be to have a family member who would believe her story and what was happening. We can see what it would be like in the world today for people to believe that a virgin would be able to conceive. As soon as Mary had this experience, she left quickly to visit Elizabeth. John leaped in Elizabeth’s womb as soon as she heard Mary’s voice. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost and prophesied that the things Mary had been told would be fulfilled. Mary made a statement of belief that this was true in that same spirit. She stayed with Elizabeth for three months.

John is born and the neighbors and cousins rejoice with Elizabeth. They come to circumcise him on the eighth day, that’s the time of naming, and they start calling him Zacharias which would be the normal name that they would call him. Elizabeth surprises all of them again and says his name is to be John. The relatives questioned this because they didn’t have anyone in the family named John. They turn to Zacharias who surprises them by confirming in writing that his name is to be John and then his nine month silence comes to an end and he praises God out loud. It says fear came to all those who dwelt around them, and it was noised about the country. They were so surprised at the naming and that the nine month’s of quiet had come to an end and Zacharias could speak and praise the Lord. It was a time of surprises—people being surprised by the truth of what was happening and what was going on.

Joseph’s surprise

You can imagine Joseph’s surprise when, after being engaged and before they had come together, Mary is found with a child of the Holy Ghost as the scriptures say. Joseph, being a just man and not wanting to make a public example of her shame, thought about divorcing her or putting her away privily. While thinking on those things, an angel surprises him and appears to him. The angel tells him that what Mary has conceived is of the Holy Ghost. He also tells Joseph to fear not, just like each of the angels has said already to the person the angel has appeared to when they were surprised. Fear not to take Mary as thy wife, telling Joseph that the truth of the matter is what Mary has told you. Mary’s story is true. What Mary has said is right. It may seem amazing but it is the truth. The angel told him you will have a son, you will call his name Jesus, and He will save His people from their sins. The scriptures don’t tell us this but I wonder if Joseph wasn’t happy to hear this, to know that Mary had been telling him the truth all along. He responds to the truth by staying with Mary even though he didn’t know her until after Jesus was born.

The shepherds’ surprise

Then we have the story of the shepherds. Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem, the home city of Joseph’s family, to be taxed. It is a small town filled with relatives. No matter what Elizabeth said, maybe not all the relatives understood what had happened with Mary and Joseph, for none of them took them in. There wasn’t any room in the inns either. The only place was a stable or cave where there was warmth and where Christ was born. The shepherds are nearby watching their flocks and an angel surprises them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about the angels. What would your response be if you were out in the dark on the hillside watching the sheep at night and all of a sudden here is this big light and an angel appears to you? The scriptures tell us they were ‘sore afraid.’ On the spectrum of afraid to really afraid, sore afraid is on the high end because that means extremely or very afraid by what they saw. The angel sees their surprise and fear and tells them glad tidings of great joy that the Savior is born in Bethlehem, and not in the king’s palace which is up on the hill not too far from Bethlehem, but in a stable in a manger. Their first surprise is doubled again as the whole multitude of the heavenly host appears praising God, giving glory and offering peace and good will to reign on earth. What is the shepherds’ response to their special surprise? They hurry to Bethlehem to see this thing which has been told them by the angels. They share the testimony with Mary and Joseph. Do you know what just happened? We were

out on the hillside and the angels appeared to us and told us what was happening, and we came to see for ourselves. The shepherds couldn't keep it quiet, they surprised people all over the neighborhood with the news of what they had seen and what was going on. The people heard it and were surprised too. They "wondered" at all the things that were told them by the shepherds concerning the angel. Mary and Joseph, I am sure, were surprised by the visitors but they welcomed the added testimony of what was taking place. Mary took these things and pondered them in her heart, the scriptures tell us.

Simeon and Anna's surprise

The surprises don't stop there. There is Simeon at the temple, a just and devout man who had the promise that before he died, he would see the Savior, the Messiah. There are a lot of people that come to the temple. The next process when you have a male child is to do a sacrifice at the temple. Mary and Joseph bring their new son, and it just so happens, with the Lord's blessing, that Simeon is the one they bring him to. I say that it just so happens, but that's not what the scriptures say. The scriptures say that Simeon felt a prompting to go to the temple at that specific time on that specific day where he met Mary and Joseph. When he took the baby in his arms, he said "Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace, according to the 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 the people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32) Mary and Joseph marveled and were surprised at what Simeon had to say. He went on speaking specifically to Mary and prophesied to her something that would be helpful to her 33 years from then. "Yea, a spear shall pierce through him to the wounding of thine own soul also; that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2:35) Mary would see so it wasn't a surprise as she stood at the cross and saw the soldiers stick a spear in His side to the wounding of her own soul. Anna who had served God in the temple with fasting and prayer for 84 years also came out and gave thanks like Simeon and talked of Jesus to all those who looked for the redemption of Israel.

Unbelievers and Believers in America are surprised

In America Samuel the Lamanite had come and surprised people with the truth when he prophesied what would happen when Jesus would come. He surprised them again when they threw him out and he came back a second time and stood on the wall and began to talk to them. They were so surprised that they met his message with arrows and rocks trying to destroy him because they didn't like the truth that he was bringing and the call to them to repent. You remember that there were people that watched steadfastly for that day and that night and that day that should be as one day as if there were no night that they might know that their faith in the prophesies of Samuel had not been in vain. You know about the unbelievers who set the day apart to put the people to death who believed in the prophesies of Christ's birth if the sign was not given. So Nephi goes out and cries mightily to the Lord all day on the day before the night they were to be killed and hears the voice of the Lord saying, "Be of good cheer, tonight is the night, tomorrow come I into the world." For Nephi maybe the response was relief more than surprise when he heard those words. At the going down of the sun there was no darkness and the people began to be astonished, surprised; there was no darkness when the night came. Many who had not believed the words of the prophets fell to the earth and became as if they were dead. They were so surprised because they knew the plan of destruction they had laid for those who believed had been frustrated the scriptures tell us. "Yea, in fine, all the people upon the face of the whole earth, from the west to the east, both in the land north and in the land south, were so exceedingly astonished" (or surprised by this sign) "that they fell to the earth." (3 Nephi 1:19) They began to fear because of their iniquity and their unbelief. Even those who had looked for the sign were surprised when it came. Unlike the shepherds who rejoiced and responded there were some people who began to doubt even what they had seen. A miracle wasn't enough

to change their hearts.

King Herod's surprise

We have another story of surprise for King Herod. You can imagine his surprise when wise men come from the east to Jerusalem saying that they are looking for the Messiah who has been born among the Jews in the land of Jerusalem according to the prophesies they had. "Where is the child that is born the Messiah of the Jews? We've come to worship him." Herod was surprised. He didn't know about this. He was troubled and it says all Jerusalem with him. They were surprised that these people would be coming from far away and asking about this which they didn't know about. So King Herod calls his chief priests together to ask where specifically this place might be. He is told of the prophesies of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. Herod takes the wise men aside privately and asks them when the star had appeared and sends them to Bethlehem with instructions to report back to him. We're not sure where they went because as the wise men come out it doesn't say that they go to Bethlehem but they see the star and it guides them to where Jesus is. I am sure Herod already had his people looking in Bethlehem.

The wise men find Mary and Joseph and they give them their gifts and then surprise Herod by not going back and telling him like he thought they would. Herod doesn't like surprises so he goes out and has all the children killed in Bethlehem and the area all around who were two years of age and younger reflecting the time the wise men said the star had first appeared that they had seen. Jesus is saved by the intervention of an angel who surprises Joseph in the middle of the night and says you need to get up and flee to Egypt. Does Joseph say well, it's 2 am in the morning? Just wait until morning and I'll get up feeling rested and then we'll go. No, the scriptures say they got up and left right then, that very night and so Jesus was saved.

Surprises, surprises, surprises, surprising with the truth; things are happening out of the ordinary, out of our normal life experiences in this story of Christ. Zacharias who couldn't speak until it was time to surprise the relatives with the name of John. Mary responded to the surprises and the wonder by saying, "... be it unto me according to thy word." Joseph who follows the directions when he is surprised about Mary and doesn't put her away or wait around when they are called to go to Egypt. The shepherds who respond to their surprise and their amazement by going quickly to find if it is true and then sharing the truth with everyone that they see. Simeon who had been waiting all his life to see the Messiah following the directions that day that took him there where he could say, "I am ready to die. I have seen the Messiah." People in America with the two different kinds of responses: those who believed and shared in the joy of knowing that Christ was born and those who fought against it and said, "If the sign comes, fine and dandy, if it doesn't we'll kill you," but then didn't believe the sign when it came. Herod's response to surprises was to strike out against the truth and try to destroy it.

The story of Christmas is the story of surprising truth that comes into peoples' lives. The same kind of thing would play out in Jesus' ministry over and over and over again as He surprised people with the truth. When he was a young boy in the temple the scriptures tell us all were astonished at His understanding and His answers. They were surprised at what He had to say and the things that He shared with them. When His parents came and saw Him, they were amazed and surprised to see Him and what He was doing. It says that when He told them, "Know you not that I must be about my Father's business?" they still didn't quite understand.

Jesus' ministry is full of surprises

You can add to the list the time when Jesus told the people, you who are without sin cast the first stone. That was a surprising answer, surprising enough that they all left. The rich man that came to Jesus saying, I have done everything. What do I need to be saved? Jesus said if you will give all you have to the poor, come follow me. He was so surprised by that answer but he couldn't do it. The woman at the well whom he told, you have had five husbands, was so surprised that He knew all about her because He was just a stranger

passing through. She brought back all her friends to see this man who offered living water.

When Jesus was asked if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, He said if you have an ox in the ditch, wouldn't you get it out? If you would get an ox out of the ditch on a Sabbath, why wouldn't you heal someone, and He did. Jesus surprised people who came to be healed by saying, thy faith has made thee whole or go thy way and sin no more. Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven," when the disciples thought the children were in the way. He surprised them with the truth.

Jesus who went home to Nazareth and read the scripture about bringing sight to the blind and healing to the people, a scripture that pointed to the Messiah, and said, "Today is this scripture fulfilled in your midst." The people were surprised and said, how can any good thing come out of Nazareth? We know Jesus, we know this young man. What is this all about?

What truth will the Lord surprise you with?

What truth will the Lord surprise you with this Christmas Season? Maybe it will be the call to do something special for the Lord like Terry's going to answer next Sunday (Terry Chown is being ordained Dec. 23). Maybe it will be a call to make something right with a family member as you gather this Christmas. Maybe it will be a call to repentance in your life that the gift of Christ this Christmas can be more readily expressed in your life. How will you respond to the truth when you are surprised by it? Will you reject it and pay the consequences in unhappiness? Will you respond immediately or will you protect yourself by throwing rocks and shooting arrows. Will you embrace the truth and look upward or will you fight against it? I hope that as we look at how Christ surprises us and how His story surprises us with the truth that this will add to our wonder and amazement, to the gift of God's son this Christmas season.

Christmas music service

The fifth Sunday of the month a music service was held, as has

been the tradition of the branch for many years.

There was a large attendance despite many people being away on the weekend between Christmas and New Years.

Jim and Linda Barber had their family present and they provided four musical numbers with piano duets and a guitar and violin trio. Sue Beck, Steven Smith, Erin Cornish and Cara Smith, Eli Cornish and a group of the Smith and Corning families provided vocal music.

Alan Smith, who presided, shared readings of the shepherd's story of Christmas, a testimony from his family's years in Hawaii and a poem, "Annie and Willie's Prayer," which his grandmother had memorized and shared at Christmas.

Jan Jordison played the piano for the service, offering this ministry. Jim Negaard offered a prayer at the service as well.



CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST
Mount Ayr Restoration Branch

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