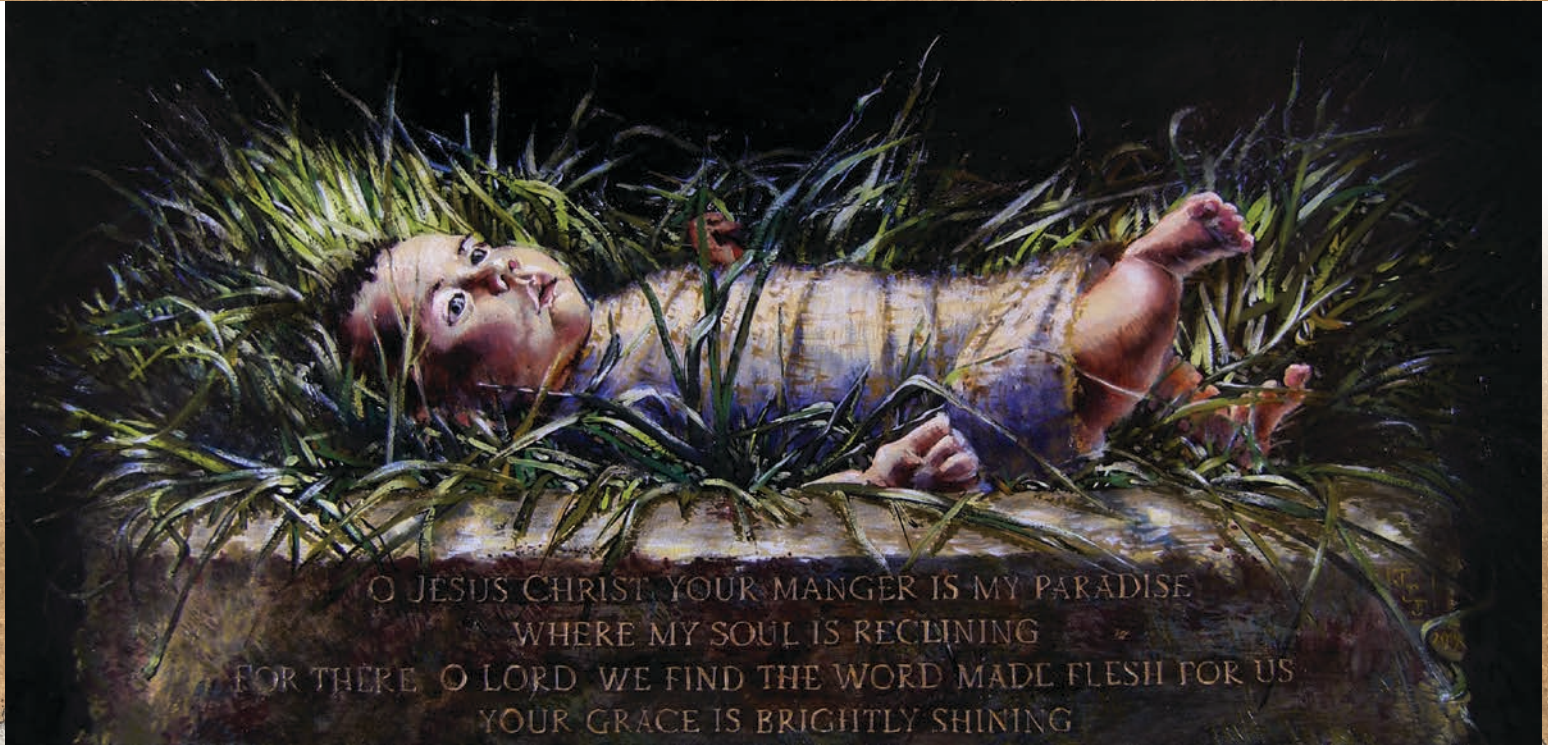


# Word Made Flesh:

THE HISTORICAL  
REALITY OF CHRISTMAS



O JESUS CHRIST YOUR MANGER IS MY PARADISE  
WHERE MY SOUL IS RECLINING  
FOR THERE O LORD WE FIND THE WORD MADE FLESH FOR US  
YOUR GRACE IS BRIGHTLY SHINING



*Advent Devotions: A gift to you from Martin Luther College, the WELS College of Ministry*

# *Word Made Flesh:*

**THE HISTORICAL  
REALITY OF CHRISTMAS**

*D*iscover how the gospels of John the Elder and Luke the Historian record the details of the incarnation—God becoming man. Each of these 25 devotions is prompted by a question about the historical accuracy of the Christmas account. Each reminds us that Christmas is not a sweet children's story or fairy tale. It is a historical event. In our skeptical times, John and Luke help us reaffirm the objective reality of Christmas.

We hope these devotions will remind you that we need more than just a spiritual idea or inspiring story. We need a real flesh-and-blood Savior, one who stepped into human history, changing it—and us—forever.

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# Jesus Is the Light

*How is the historical birth of Jesus a light coming into the world?*

*The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. John 1:9*

Philosophers have sought to bring the light of meaning and insight to a confused and muddled world. Economists have worked out intricate theories in an effort to bring the light of efficiency and attainment to a mean and selfish world. Scientists have uncovered the wonders of nature in an effort to bring the light of capability and advancement and ease to a hardscrabble world. Physicians dissect the complexities of the body in order to bring the light of healing and vigor to a sick and dying world.

And it's not that these lights don't count; they just don't count for much, finally.

It's not that they don't shine; they just don't shine brightly enough. These lights are limited, earthbound, and ultimately ineffectual against the darkness of sin, the thick darkness of death, and the utter darkness of hell. They can't do the job.

And what is the job? Lighting us up with life—bringing the beautiful, holy, vigorous, permanent, joyful light of life to mankind! In verse 4 of his opening chapter, John explains the reality of Jesus' person and purpose when he writes, *"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind."*

Jesus is the true light of life, John explains, true in the sense of genuine and effective. Jesus is the light that gets the job done. The light of life shined as he lived a righteous life in our place. The light of life shined when he accepted our sin and guilt and was punished in our stead. The light of life shined when Jesus rose from the dead to live forever, the true and shining hope of our own resurrection and life.

The lights that we put up in our homes during Advent are not mere decorations, but a celebration of history. God's Son, our Lord Jesus, came into this world to give us the light of life. So enjoy the Christmas lights around you this Advent season by rejoicing in the bright, beautiful life Jesus gives to you.

**Lord Jesus, you are the bright Morningstar, the true Light of the world, and you have brought life and immortality to light for mankind. I am alive for your sake, and I will live forever with you in the wonderful light of heaven. But I have this request here and now—help me shine with the light of your love in my home, at work, and among my friends and neighbors. Yes, let me shine for you. Amen.**

*Rev. Jeff Schone serves Martin Luther College as vice president for student life.*





# Word Made Flesh

DECEMBER 2

Why is it necessary for the Word to truly be made flesh?

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. John 1:14*

As we consider why it is necessary for the Word to truly be made flesh, we find both a complex simplicity and a simple complexity to the question and its many answers. Think about it this way: A brilliant and learned doctor of theology cannot fully answer the question, yet a kindergartner can easily explain it by proclaiming, "Jesus lived and died for me."

It can be interesting to note that John begins his gospel the same way Genesis begins: "In the beginning . . ." Then he quickly takes us through a vital identification process when he writes: "In the beginning was the Word and the

Word was with God and the Word was God." Here some complexity can be very evident. The Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. That is complex!

That Word became flesh. God became man. Even more, he was born a baby. Really? God, a baby? The All-Powerful needed his mother to feed and change and care for him. The Eternal Word couldn't speak words as a baby.

Why? Because of sin. Your sin. My sin. The sins of the whole world. God demands perfection, not just good effort or trying hard. Each and every thought, word, and action you have ever had is under God's microscope of perfection. You cannot get away with anything less than 100 percent perfection, 100 percent of the time. You cannot give that to God. No one can. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And God's justice proclaims that the wages of sin is death.

This is why the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus became man to live the perfect life we are not able to. Then the Immortal One died, paying each of our debts to God. Then he conquered death with his resurrection, assuring us that we too will rise.

It is complex to think of God becoming man and living among us as my substitute. It is complex to think of Jesus living perfectly, then dying in my place as my substitute. But by faith, it becomes an answer simple enough for a child to proclaim, "Jesus loves me and lived and died for me."

**Dear Jesus, thank you for being made flesh and becoming my substitute in both life and death. Amen.**

*Rev. Doug Lange serves Martin Luther College as a professor of physical education and theology.*



# Witnesses of God's Glory

*Is this really the testimony of these people who “have seen his glory”?*

*John [the Baptist] testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” John 1:15*

If you were on evangelism calls with members of your congregation, would you really stop a stranger or go up to a door and say, “Hi! We’re from Christ Lutheran Church, and we would love to share with you this message, that ‘the one coming after us has surpassed us because he was before us?’” Would you put that on a church mailer or brochure?

That message may not connect with prospects today, but in John’s day, the

testimony he gave would have been heard in a completely different way. In particular, they would have picked up on the words, “He who comes.” In John’s day, “the Coming One” was a well-known epithet for the Messiah. The audience would have known of whom John was speaking—the one promised to Adam, to Abraham, to David, to the world. And when John testified, “he was before me,” some of them may even have understood that the Coming One would be “the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father.”

But most important is that John’s testimony pointed to Christ as the one the people should put their faith in. John, knowing he must become less, turned their focus away from himself to the true Savior soon to make his appearance.

John never lived to see the full revelation of God’s glory in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. But with eyes

of Spirit-given faith, by God’s grace we have. In this way our testimony about Jesus may use different words for a modern world, but at its core it is exactly the same as John’s: Put your faith and trust in the one who came and won your redemption. Put your faith and trust in the one who is coming again to judge the world! For he will never drive away anyone who comes to him in repentance and faith (*John 6:37*), and whoever trusts in him will never be put to shame (*Psalms 25:3; Romans 10:11*).

**Lord Jesus, you sit at the highest place in heaven, the place to which your Father raised you up after you won our salvation. By your Spirit, strengthen our trust in you, and fill us with joy in the hope you have freely and graciously given to us. Amen.**

*Rev. Dr. Keith Wessel serves Martin Luther College as a professor of Latin and Greek.*



*How* does the historical  
life of Jesus make the  
Father known?

*No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. John 1:18*

Today's verse reveals a Christmas mystery captured in the popular song "Mary, Did You Know?". The song climaxes with the lyrics, "that sleeping child you're holding is the great I AM." As both God and man, Jesus' life reveals who God is.

Consider a few highlights of Jesus' life. As a young boy, he was perfectly obedient to his parents. As a 12-year-old,



he astounded the teachers of the law at the Temple with his knowledge. He celebrated a wedding and miraculously provided wine out of water so that the couple would not be embarrassed for running out (*John 2:1-10*). When he came across the funeral procession of a young man whose widowed mother had now lost her only son, Jesus' heart went out to her. Jesus raised the son back to life so he could care for his mother (*Luke 7:11-15*).

As people crowded around Jesus in Jericho, a short tax collector named Zacchaeus climbed a tree to get a glimpse. Out of the throng, Jesus singled out Zacchaeus to bring salvation to Zacchaeus' whole household (*Luke 19:1-10*). Jesus regularly ate with "sinners" but condemned the self-righteous.

And when those closest to him betrayed him, Jesus eagerly sought their return. He kept giving Judas chances to repent, even while Judas betrayed him (*Luke 22:48*). In the midst of trials and beatings, Jesus gave Peter a knowing look to turn him from denial (*Luke 22:61*).

When the disciple Philip requested, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us," Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (*John 14:8-9*)

What does Jesus' life show us about the Father? It reveals that our God is compassionate. He knows each one of us personally, and he cares about the details of our lives. He celebrates our

joys, empathizes with our sorrows, and relentlessly pursues us when we turn from him.

But the greatest mystery Jesus reveals is the depth of the Father's love. As Jesus proclaimed, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (*John 15:13*). Jesus' life, death, and resurrection reveal just how far the Father will go so we can live with him forever.

**Dear Father, thank you for revealing the mysteries of your love for us through the life of Jesus. Amen.**

*Dr. John Meyer serves Martin Luther College as director of Graduate Studies and Continuing Education.*

# A Historical Account

Why does Luke begin his gospel as if he's done historical research?

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. Luke 1:1-4*

We turn now to Luke, traveling companion of Paul and world-class historian. He combs the documents

and interviews the witnesses. He begins where it all began.

To be a fly on the wall! Imagine his conversation with Mary: "A sword will pierce your soul?" He said that? O Mary!"

As to Jesus' resurrection, you could have the "where were you when?" conversation on any street corner in Jerusalem.

Credentialed historians charge Luke with "habitual accuracy." He perfectly captures the atmosphere of a Jerusalem, Ephesus, or Philippi. What he gets right about the fluid politics of Rome in particular times and places is, by all accounts, astonishing.

Although he didn't have to, Luke constantly wagers his reputation: "Check me on this!" he says. C. S. Lewis

commented, "I've been reading myths all my life. This is *not* what they are like."

Luke wagers *everything*. If his unembellished reporting is wrong in the particulars, then folks can safely dismiss him when it comes to *his true subject*—truth of another kind. From G. K. Chesterton: "Allow one sun in your sky, one mystery too bright to look into, and all else is lit up in that light."

God came near. All the way down. All the way in.

*"Nails, spear shall pierce him through,  
the cross be borne for me, for you;  
hail, hail, the Word made flesh,  
the babe, the Son of Mary." (CW 344:2)*

If Christmas is a gathering storm of sadness or anxiety for you, we have much we'd love to say to you over an open gospel: the obsessive Luke, the urgent Mark, the timeless Matthew,



the “open book” we call John. This is first. Your reconciliation to “God from God” and “Light from Light” is history, actual history, yet charged with the holy just the same.

At a particular time. In a particular place. Through a particular Jewish maiden.

It happened.

**Lord, what a path lay ahead for you because we happened! Humanity has an ugly history. So do I. In wonder we search the record, sift the reliable facts, and find you there, the world’s Redeemer and mine, compassionate, glorious, and oh-so-real! Amen.**

*Rev. Dr. Mark Paustian serves Martin Luther College as a professor of English and Hebrew.*





Who were those  
eyewitnesses and servants  
of the Word?

*Just as they were handed down to us by  
those who from the first were eyewitnesses  
and servants of the word. Luke 1:2*

Some think, “I need to see it to believe it!” Well, many did! Imagine the thrill of the aged Simeon. Not only did he get to see his salvation in the baby Jesus, but he also got to hold his salvation in his arms! Thomas put his hands in Jesus’ wounds, which won that salvation! We not only have eyewitnesses but “hand witnesses.” These eyewitnesses that Luke talks about are the most valuable form of evidence of the Bible’s truth.



# Eyewitnesses of the Word

At the time of Luke's writing, his gospel could be fact-checked by the first audience. In addition, many of these eyewitnesses of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection were willing to die for their testimony. No one dies for a lie. Church history says that Nathanael had his skin flayed off before they crucified him. It also says that Peter was forced to watch his wife be crucified for three days before he himself was crucified upside down. All of them could have saved their skin if they had just said they were lying. But they were clearly telling the truth.

Since Luke was a Gentile and not one of the apostles, who were these eyewitnesses that he spoke to? We know that Luke accompanied Paul on his later missionary journeys through his imprisonment. He might have had the opportunity to speak with some of

the apostles in Jerusalem. In addition, it's hard to imagine that Luke did not speak in depth with Mary because of his gospel's intimate details of Jesus' birth, including the very thoughts going through Mary's mind. Finally, we cannot say who the eyewitnesses were with absolute certainty. Who they are is not as important as what they saw.

Martin Luther said that Christianity is just one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread. The eyewitnesses found the Bread of Life in the manger, and now 2,000 years later, their testimony still stands.

This Advent, marvel as you read how the shepherds run to praise, Mary ponders, Simeon holds, and we rejoice that God came to earth to be our Savior. He let his people see it with their own eyes so that

we can see it through theirs, all so that you can be confident that the baby in the manger is God, your Savior.

They saw it! Believe it!

**Heavenly Father, you sent Jesus to be our Savior. You allowed eyewitnesses to see it so they could tell us. This Christmas season, lead us to see your Son through their eyes. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

*Rev. David Scharf serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology.*

# An Orderly Account

*Do we actually have  
Luke's orderly account?*

*With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus. Luke 1:3*

The life of Jesus changed the world like no other event in human history. From his birth announced by angels, to the huge crowds that followed him, to his death on the cross that tore the temple's curtain in two, and finally to his glorious resurrection where he appeared to hundreds of disciples, Jesus changed the world and, with it, the lives and eternities of so many believers.

In the decades after Jesus' resurrection, his believers told the story of Jesus wherever they went. The details of Jesus' life were shared with friends and

relatives, even total strangers, because who Jesus is and what he did changed everything. But in those decades, while there would have been some who recorded details of Jesus' life on parchment, no doubt, the message of this saving gospel was spread predominantly through believers' speech.

Most scholars state that the gospel of Mark was the first to record the details of Jesus' life. However, while it is filled with Jesus' miracles, his teaching, and his death and resurrection, details like Jesus' birth and childhood aren't recorded in that gospel.

As with any story, narratives were excitedly shared with others about how this God-Man Jesus changed the world, but there would have been a benefit to an *orderly* account of the life of Jesus. And so, Luke set out to do just that. Through interviews, research, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke recorded the life of Jesus: his birth in

Bethlehem, his ministry in Galilee, his crucifixion to pay for your sins, and his empty tomb.

And doesn't it make sense that the God who is not a God of disorder, but order (*1 Corinthians 14:33*), would inspire a gospel to be written this way? The God who ordered the course of the world for the birth of Jesus has also ordered your life so that you would be called his own through that same Jesus born in Bethlehem. Praise God that he ordered the events of the world so that through Jesus, you will be at his side eternally.

**Dear God, I praise and thank you for ordering the events of the world for the birth of my Savior Jesus. May the promise that you have chosen me before the world began comfort me in times of trouble and spur me on to live for you. Amen.**

*Rev. Nicolas Schmoller serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology and Greek.*



# The Certainty of Christmas

8 DECEMBER

*C*ertainty? How can historical testimony give me certainty about Jesus? And isn't faith different from certainty?

*I . . . decided to write an orderly account . . . so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.* Luke 1:3,4

We will better understand Luke here if we look for a moment at a thinker with utterly different convictions, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81).

Lessing was a champion of reason in the Age of Enlightenment. He held that there is an "ugly, broad ditch" between history and religion. By religion he meant a life of love based on principles that reasonable people can discover for themselves and know with certainty. But he found no certainty in Christianity with its foundations in the distant past

and its reliance on miracle stories. Lessing said that if he could see miracles with his own eyes, that would be convincing, but he didn't trust miracle stories from long ago. He was similarly dismissive of dogmas about God based on biblical claims that God revealed himself in the past. Try as he might, Lessing couldn't leap from Bible history to the kind of religion he felt he could be sure of. The ditch was too wide.

But the ditch is not too wide for God. He has built a bridge. One end is firmly planted on the bedrock of sacred history, the inspired record of God's self-revelation, his promises, and his miracles going back to the beginning. The bridge itself is Jesus Christ, the Son of God born in Bethlehem, in whom God has entered human history in the most profound and personal way. The other end of the bridge brings us, not to the stripped-down, reasonable religion of Lessing, but to life with God in this world and the next through faith in Jesus.

Luke's heart was mastered by this reality of God at work in history to fulfill his plans and promises. Recognizing the value of sacred history, he wrote both a gospel and the book of Acts. Luke did not naively suppose that his accounts of miracles would convince everyone; he knew that even seeing a miracle would not win over those who close their ears to God's Word (*Luke 16:27-31*). But he also knew that the only kind of religious certainty that matters is the certainty God gives through a gospel message that is rooted and realized in history. As Luke tells us, he writes the story of Jesus "so that you may know the certainty" of Christianity.

**Dear Father, use the Bible's sure, historical message about Jesus to keep us sure as we trust and serve you. Amen.**

*Rev. Joel Fredrich serves Martin Luther College as a professor of Greek.*

# In the Time Of...

**Why** does Luke include historical details such as the name of the king?

*In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Luke 1:5*

If I wrote, "A plane crashed into a building in Manhattan," and that is all I wrote, some might think I'm reporting about the 1945 incident when a plane crashed into the Empire State Building. Others might think I'm referring to the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers. If all I wrote was, "A plane crashed into a building in Manhattan," you might not know which incident I meant.

A writer gives details to be clear. God wants his communication with us to be clear.

If I had mentioned who was mayor, governor, or president at the time of the plane crash, that would also be a way of making it clear when it happened. God gives us not only the truth of the gospel but he also gives us details.

In Genesis he tells us the rivers that ran through the Garden of Eden. The prophets began with who was reigning when the word of the Lord came to them. God gives details. These details help make it clear for those who believe and bolster our witness to others.

We are called to be witnesses. In the series *Dragnet*, when Joe Friday questioned a witness, he wanted the facts, just the facts. Details mattered. When a person is telling a story or trying

to solve a problem or explain a mystery, details matter. As witnesses God has not only equipped us with the truth about the birth of our Savior but also with surrounding details.

Knowing who was king at that time or knowing the ancestry of someone does not bring one to faith. But having these historical facts detailed for us in the Holy Scriptures only bolsters our testimony as witnesses for the God of truth.

This Advent, remember the details. This Advent, share the details of our Savior's birth.

**Heavenly Father, we thank you for the Word made flesh, our Savior, Jesus Christ. We thank you for the Holy Scriptures that announced his coming and told of his life and resurrection. We thank you for filling your Word**



**with details so that we who were not  
there might be effective witnesses to  
your loving truth. Amen.**

*Rev. Aaron Robinson serves Martin Luther  
College as a professor of English and as  
cultural diversity coordinator.*



# Angels

*A*n angel appeared? Are there really angels? Isn't the material universe all there is?

*Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.* Luke 1:11

The old geologist out in the desert had a Zechariah moment. He had been doing what his people had been doing for a long time. The land for a long time had looked dry, dead, flat, and dull. Dragging his tools up one more rise in the sand, he thought, "What a God-forsaken place this is."

Then suddenly he saw it. Right next to him he saw the expanse of the Grand Canyon. Oh, my—there it was! The world as he had never seen it before. The sweep and majesty, the beauty he had

only heard about. Now he could see it: the vivid color, texture, and depth of God.

Zechariah saw the angel after Israel had crawled through 400 years of God's silence. For centuries God had not shown himself through miracles or prophets. That's a long, dry, and dull stretch of watching and waiting for God to show something. Not surprising, then, if service in the temple of the Lord had become a bit mechanical.

Then Zechariah saw the angel. The sweep and majesty and beauty of God's hand was visibly active in the land. And not just one angel at one time. God filled the dreams and draped the night sky with messengers people could see. When God was about to speak again in the flesh, he sent angels. When humanity could not afford to miss the gift, God sent angels. When we and all history needed to see the color and texture and depth of his grace, God sent angels.

But notice that the old man responded to this divine visible intervention into our world with doubt. "How can I be sure of this?" (Luke 1:18). Even seeing an angel is not enough?

God in mercy gave Zechariah nine months to think about it. God then let the old man use more of his senses—he would feel the weight of God's promise kept in his arms. He would savor the joy. And finally he would learn from the angels to sing:

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, Because he has come to his people and redeemed them" (*Luke 1:68*).

**This Christmas, Lord, help us to see, savor, and sing the good news of the angels. Amen.**

*Rev. Brian Dose serves Martin Luther College as a professor of English.*



*Do I really have a heart that needs to be turned?*

*And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Luke 1:17*

Yahweh spoke through Malachi: “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.” (*Malachi 4:5,6*)

Jesus confirmed this prophecy when he said, “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who

was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear.” (*Matthew 11:13-15*)

Why should I listen? If I don’t see myself among the brood of vipers John condemned on Jordan’s bank (*Luke 3:7-9*), then sly Satan has the upper hand, convincing me I’m better than others and less in need of being saved from my sin-soaked self. That’s why.

The mystery and miracle of the good news John shared (*Luke 3:18*) is that the holy, majestic, unapproachable Father, in spite of my general worthlessness and rascality, chooses me to be his own, turns my heart to Jesus through the means of grace, and welcomes me as a sinless saint into his glorious kingdom.

I definitely don’t turn my own heart. Most moments I savor sin and run from Christ instead of running to him. Rather, my gracious God puts individuals in my life to expose through the law my slavery

to self-love and sin, and introduce me through the gospel to my rescuer. The Holy Spirit grabs my wayward head and stubborn heart, turning and refocusing them on my Jesus, what he’s done for me already, and what blessings lie ahead as he gives me the opposite of what I deserve. The Spirit makes me crave the gospel and shun sin’s snares as he turns my heart toward Jesus.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift (*2 Corinthians 9:15*).

**Holy Spirit, fill my heart,  
cleanse my life in every part.  
Your own temple I would be  
now and for eternity. Amen.** (*CW 593:5*)

*Professor Alan Uher serves Martin Luther College as a field supervisor of teacher candidates.*

# Promises Kept

DECEMBER 12

*What* does the fulfillment of prophecy have to do with the Christian message?

*And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.* Luke 1:17

“What should we do?” That’s the question John the Baptist heard from the people gathered around him at the Jordan River. After water and Word worked faith, the people longed to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Farmers, tax collectors, soldiers. By the Spirit they were empowered to change their lives to honor and serve their Savior. They were “a people prepared for the Lord.”

God promised that in the spirit of Elijah, John the Baptist would call parents to

repent and set their hearts on the children God had given them, that they might raise them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. In the Spirit’s power, God used John’s message and ministry to prepare the people for the public ministry of Jesus, just as he said he would.

Please don’t take God’s accomplishment lightly. It’s not as if the people through whom God worked were born cooperative and eager to serve. No, God changed them by the gospel, just as he changed you. By the gospel, he empowered John to call his people to repent. And when they did, God proved not only his grace and goodness, but his faithfulness to his promises.

Yes, God kept his promise to bless his people through the message of John the Baptist. And he kept his promise—fulfilled the prophecy—to send the one to whom John pointed. No small feat when you consider the enmity of Satan and the opposition of the world. But who can stop God from accomplishing his

promises? No one. Luke teaches us that our God is a God who fulfills prophecies. A God who keeps promises.

To which promises of God are you clinging today? His promise to forgive you for Jesus’ sake? His promise to hear and answer your prayers? His promise to provide what you need today? His promise to calm your fears in Christ? His promise to take you home to heaven? Because of his power, his love, his goodness and grace, God will keep his promises to you, just as he kept his promises about sending John and then a Savior. And so we trust him. There is no better life than a life of dependence on the God who keeps his promises.

**I am trusting you for power;  
you can never fail.  
Words which you yourself shall give me  
must prevail. Amen. (CW 816:5)**

*Rev. Dr. John Boeder serves Martin Luther College as campus pastor and a professor of theology.*



# The Other Miracle Baby

*Was there really a second miraculous birth in the Christmas story?*

*But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. . . . “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.” Luke 1:7, 25*

I cannot imagine how Elizabeth must have felt. In a culture that valued children much more than ours does today, she was sterile, unable to have children. Some might say unproductive, unfruitful. She felt disgraced among her people. Did the other women with lots of kids shoot her haughty glances? Instead of empathizing, did they look down on her, even whisper insults? No doubt, here was an opportunity for Elizabeth’s “fruitful” neighbors to have a field day.

How ugly is our sin! It has flowed from Adam and Eve to every one of us. It has brought a dreadful curse on all of us. Infertility is just one of so many painful reminders all around us. Don’t we all struggle with our own unique and painful reminders?

But it gets even uglier. Instead of empathizing with others who struggle with something especially painful like infertility, the sinner in us is tempted to rub it in, to treat them as if their sin is worse than ours, as if their disgrace is somehow greater than ours!

Let’s be honest. You and I are *all* a disgrace before God. The ugly stain of our sin is real, and we can do *nothing* to remove it. You and I are as helpless to remove our disgrace as Elizabeth was. God knows this, and he wants us to know it. Why else would he choose so many women who struggled with infertility to carry out his plan to save sinners? We find Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah,

and more in the Old Testament. And now, at the dawn of the New Testament, the gospel writer Luke begins his historical record of God’s saving plan with two more miracle babies: not only our Savior Jesus, born of the virgin Mary, but also his forerunner John (the Baptist), Elizabeth’s precious son in her old age.

In these days and in this way, the Lord has shown us his favor and taken away our disgrace. He has made it perfectly clear that he has done it all for us.

**Dear Father, you have truly saved us by grace alone. Help us, as sinners washed clean with Jesus’ blood and now clothed in his righteousness, to show favor and empathy to all of our fellow human beings. Amen.**

*Rev. Ross Stelljes serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology.*

# The Deep History of Christmas

*How is Christmas connected to the deeper history of King David?*

*God sent the angel Gabriel . . . to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. Luke 1:26-27*

Early in his reign, King David decided to build a temple in Jerusalem. It would be God's beautiful, symbolic home among his people. But the Lord declined the offer. He had in mind to build David a house. God promised David a house not of wood and stone, but of flesh and blood, descendants to sit on his throne forever.

But "forever" seemed to last only a few centuries, as David's line steadily declined in piety, prestige, and power. A handful of good kings bucked the trend, but

never with lasting effect. David's Israel soon split in half. Thereafter his sons ruled the southern stub, Judah. Finally Babylon wrecked Judah and took captive Judah's last king with all his subjects who mattered. So collapsed the house of David. Though a remnant of the people did return, Judah was never—except briefly—again a sovereign country.

And never again did a son of David sit on an earthly throne. So much for forever. A mere thousand years after God's promise, the legal heir to David's throne lived in Nazareth, 90 miles from Jerusalem and centuries removed from regal splendor. This son of kings was a carpenter named Joseph.

Joseph was engaged to Mary, a virgin also descended from David, though through a largely different branch of David's family. The angel Gabriel told Mary that she would, by the Holy Spirit's miracle, give birth to a son, God's Son too. Jesus would

reign forever on David's throne over Israel, a kingdom—as Jesus would say just before his death—not of this world, but rather a spiritual kingdom of all who believe in him as Savior.

God's Son came to the womb of Mary, a virgin descended from sinners—some notorious (think of Lot, Judah, Ahab, Manasseh, and, yes, David)—to take on our flesh and blood. Through Mary, Jesus became our sinless brother to live and die and save. Through Joseph, his legal earthly father, came title to David's throne. Through the virgin and the carpenter, God fulfilled his promise to David of a throne lasting forever, a promise he made and kept not just for David, but also for you.

**Gracious God, thank you for making me a citizen of Jesus' eternal kingdom. Keep me loyal to my King. In his name. Amen.**

*Rev. Daniel Balge serves Martin Luther College as a professor of Greek and German.*



# Never-Ending Christmas

15 DECEMBER

*How* does the historical reality of Christmas lead to a reign that will never end?

*[Gabriel said,] "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."* Luke 1:32–33

How would you feel—no matter what your occupation—if God were to tell you that you were going to have a descendant who would carry on your vocation *forever*? That's what God told King David around 1000 bc. David was to have a son who would rule over his kingdom *forever* (2 Samuel 7:13). Of course, David knew that this incredible promise could only be fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah who would be God himself.

Now fast forward to Nazareth, when the angel Gabriel came to Mary to announce that she was going to have a baby. Gabriel repeats the same words that were first spoken to David! Mary's child was to be the one who would sit on David's throne and have a kingdom that would *never end*.

We can see how God's plan of salvation from sin was tied to real people in history. First, David was given a remarkable promise. Then Mary, a descendant of David, had a remarkable baby.

As a result, we as believers in Jesus are the big winners! Now, in keeping with God's promise, we have a perfect King who will reign forever over a kingdom that *will never end*.

In the world of modern politics, I am often happy when a politician's term of service comes to an end, since I am hopeful that the successor may be better. More often than not, however, the next

politician disappoints just as much, if not more, than the previous one.

How different and wonderful it is in the kingdom of Jesus. We have a perfect King. Jesus washes away our sins with his blood and reconciles us to God the Father. Jesus hears our prayers and lovingly provides everything we need. And then, best of all, we know that arrangement will continue for all eternity. Jesus' kingdom *will never end*.

Because of Christmas, we never need to hope for a better ruler to come. We have a perfect King, and he is sitting on the throne *forever*.

**Lord Jesus, thank you for bringing us into your wonderful kingdom. We look forward to having you as our King forever. Amen.**

*Rev. Thomas Nass serves Martin Luther College as a professor of Hebrew.*



*I*s the virgin birth  
truly historical?

*The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."*

Luke 1:35

Within the last century, our science and technology have improved our understanding of pregnancy and childbirth. We can know very early if a woman is pregnant, we can monitor the baby's health, and we can even know whether to prepare for a girl or a boy.

Mary didn't have the advantages of modern medicine, but she did understand how pregnancy worked.



# Miraculous Facts

That's why she asked in Luke 1:34, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Still, she believed and knew it to be true because the angel declared it. God is at work in this miracle, and the angel carried that message. In a similar way, an angel declared to Abraham's wife, the aged mother of Isaac, that she would have a son. An angel declared to Zechariah's wife, the aged mother of John, that she would have a son. Both were miracles, but both were long-married couples. When Mary was told of her pregnancy, she was not only younger, she was not yet married.

This miracle would also be the birth of a son, but not just any son. The one born would be holy, would "be called the Son of God." She was also told of Elizabeth's pregnancy and assured of God's promise. When she visited her cousin

Elizabeth, the baby leaped. The boy, John, was born, and Mary witnessed these promises fulfilled.

At that same time, in the book of Matthew, we find the account of Joseph. He knows the child of Mary is not his child. He received a visit from a messenger of God, the angel. Joseph could not understand how this woman pledged to be his wife, a virgin, could be pregnant. But he too listened to the words of the angel and believed. He took Mary as his wife, and they named the son Jesus.

God's promises of three miracle boys came true. There were witnesses to the lives of Isaac, John, and Jesus. God's messengers, his angels, Mary, and Joseph all testified to the virgin birth of the Son of God.

**Dear Lord, instill in me the humble, quiet acceptance to believe the miracles used in providing me with eternal life through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the holy Son of God. Amen.**

*Professor Greg Diersen serves Martin Luther College as a professor of math and science.*

# A Message that Moves Us

*How can a baby leap in the womb?*

*At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.*

Luke 1:39-41

How do you behave when the impossible occurs? In today's reading, John's amazing leap poses that question to Elizabeth and her relative Mary.

John's movement went beyond the expected six-month stirring of an infant in his mother's womb. First, the boy's joy kept Gabriel's promise to John's father, Zechariah. The angel had prophesied that the priest's son would "be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born" (Luke 1:15). Still three months from his

own delivery, John knew and celebrated that Mary was pregnant. John recognized Jesus, whose human body was the size of a mere poppy seed, as the Son of God. This understanding could come only from the Lord.

Second, the Holy Spirit gave John and his mother, Elizabeth, another astounding perception. Mary's baby would keep a pledge made to all sinners in the Garden of Eden. John and Elizabeth proclaimed the Savior's earthly arrival to redeem God's fallen children. Their certainty had one source. Christ alone. Moved by the gift of faith, these unlikely mothers had one response to the impossible. They rejoiced! They used everything in their power to praise and thank their loving God.

How do you and I respond to miracles? This world's wonders peak at lottery triumph, astonishing weight loss, and happiness-granting gadgets. Instead, faith perceives miracles that are authentic. Scripture promises extraordinary realities.

Each day, God delivers. What is our reaction? Baptism vanquishes incurable sin and erases our incalculable debt before God. Communion invites us to share in the physical body and blood of a Savior who died and rose again to rescue us from hell. Prayer provides an instant, unlimited audience with the Creator of all things. Each year, Advent affirms that God sacrificed his holy Son to earn eternal paradise for you.

Our certainty has one source. Christ alone. Moved by the gift of faith, we have one response to the impossible. We rejoice! We use everything in our power to praise and thank our loving God.

**Dear Lord, move me to celebrate the impossibilities foretold in your Word and fulfilled in my life. Please guide my words and actions to reflect gratitude for your limitless mercy and love. Amen.**

*Professor Paul Grubbs serves Martin Luther College as a professor of English.*



## Why does Luke record a census?

*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)* Luke 2:1-2

Caesar Augustus was a larger-than-life figure in Roman history. The Senate acclaimed him “Augustus” (most revered), and he ruled as Rome’s first “emperor” from 27 BC to 14 AD. All the same, he was not destined for greatness from birth. Julius Caesar adopted young Octavian (his given name), who was his grand-nephew, as his heir. Octavian then won support from important military and political leaders who helped him gain power and authority after Julius Caesar’s assassination. His impressive legacy was largely the result of status that he carefully crafted.

In keeping with the pattern of Roman control of conquered territories, Augustus issued a census decree. This was common custom. The reach of Rome’s empire required a counting for the purpose of taxation and management. Luke adds another detail regarding the timing: A man named Quirinius had a leadership role in the Roman province of Syria at the time.

Clearly, there was purpose behind Luke’s unique recounting of Jesus’ birth. He was locating Jesus in historical time and place. The birth of Jesus, true God who took on human flesh, was not some sort of myth. The context was genuine. Additionally, Roman census methods required registration at the place of family origin. This meant that Joseph and his pregnant wife, Mary, would need to head south from Galilee to Bethlehem—in fulfillment of a prophecy from Micah (5:2). God’s plans happened as he said they would.

No doubt, however, you have heard that piecing together the details from whatever remains of the ancient evidence is not

an easy task. This much can be verified: Caesar Augustus issued several census decrees during his reign; the biblical description fits what we know about Roman procedure; Quirinius served as a leader in Roman Syria. The exact chronological sequencing is difficult to order with precision based on the human records available. By faith, we trust that we have an accurate account.

That’s the history lesson. And then consider the legacies. Caesar, a human, claimed divine status. Jesus, God from eternity, humbled himself to be born in time and die as a human to save humans from their sin. Augustus looks humanly impressive; Jesus appears humanly defeated. Appearances can be deceiving. Faith grasps the truth.

**Lord, sanctify us by the truth; your Word is truth. Amen.**

*Rev. Paul Koelpin serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology and history.*

# Savior from the Start

DECEMBER 19

Wasn't the belief that Jesus is a Savior from sins a later invention?

*[Mary said,] "And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Luke 1:47*

Had there been a crowd of reporters nearby on the night of the angel's visit to Mary, what might they have asked that favored mother-to-be? "What did Gabriel say? Why were you chosen? Is your child really going to be the Son of God? Is he *really* going to save us from our sins?" Whatever they might have asked, how might Mary have answered them? What proof did she have that what God had promised through Gabriel was true and trustworthy?

When questions arise about the historical reality of the Savior's birth, how do we as

believers answer them? What evidence do we have? What proof is there that the plan all along was that this child would be the Savior we so desperately needed? Has Jesus' story been embellished, or is he really the one in whom Mary rejoiced: God, the Savior from sins?

Thanks be to God that he has given us the answer in his Word! Throughout history, God has identified himself as the God who saves. Roughly 700 years before Gabriel's visit, Isaiah praised God as his salvation, strength, and defense (*Isaiah 12:2*). Three hundred years before that, King David named him: "God, my Savior" (*Psalms 25:5*). Five centuries earlier, Moses heard God describe himself as compassionate, gracious, and forgiving (*Exodus 34:6*). But the earliest instance of God identifying himself as the God who saves occurred in Eden. It is that first proclamation of the gospel, that promise made in a broken Paradise, that answer

to the problem that had flooded into the world with Adam and Eve's fall. There, in the shadow of the tree, as sin's darkness destroyed his perfect creation, God made a promise to save (*Genesis 3:15*). Because that is who he is.

Mary's child was to be the fulfillment of that promise made in the garden, the one who would crush the serpent's head and make right all that had gone wrong. Mary would give birth to a son, and his name would be Jesus. She knew deep down exactly who he would be.

By God's grace, so do we. During this Advent season and in response to anyone—reporter or otherwise—who would question who Jesus really is to us and to the world, let us sing out with Mary: "This is my God, my Savior, my Savior from the start."



**Come, Jesus, come, Messiah Lord,  
lost Paradise restore;  
lead past the angel's flaming sword—  
come, open heaven's door. Amen.**  
(CW 304:4)

*Rev. Nathan Savage serves  
Martin Luther College as an instructor  
and dorm supervisor.*



# A Historical Homecoming

*Why* did Joseph have to return to his hometown?

*And everyone went to their own town to register. Luke 2:3*

Have you ever felt like things were out of your control? I wonder whether Joseph felt like things were out of his control. The details of the census required Joseph to return to his hometown. Joseph's hometown was Bethlehem because "he belonged to the house and line of David" (Luke 2:4).

From an earthly perspective, the timing was not ideal. Mary was late into her pregnancy. I wonder what Joseph thought about a trip to Bethlehem at this time. But things were out of his control.

When things are out of my control, I tend to start worrying and to stop trusting God. But when things are

out of my control, they are still in God's control.

God was working through history to make sure that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. God had worked through the decrees of earthly rulers before. In the Old Testament, when his people had repeatedly rebelled against him, God used Nebuchadnezzar to chastise his people by taking them into exile (1 Kings 25:1, 21b). God used King Cyrus of Persia to send his people home from captivity (Ezra 1:1-4). And now God worked through a decree of Caesar Augustus to ensure that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. Things were out of Joseph's control, but they were still in God's control.

Looking back on it, we can often see that God was working through events. It's harder to see that while we're going through it. But when things seem out of your control, remember that they are still in God's control. And just like

God worked through events to bring Joseph to his hometown, God is working through the events in your life to bring you home, home to heaven.

God worked it out so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem to be your Savior. God worked it out so that you would hear his Word and believe it. And God uses the events in your life to call you to keep coming back to his Word, where he brings you closer to him, until someday he brings you to your true home, your home in heaven.

**Lord God, you brought Joseph to his hometown so that your Son would be born in Bethlehem. Bring me ever closer to you through your Word so that you might bring me to my home in heaven. Amen.**

*Rev. Daniel Waldschmidt serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology and Greek.*



# The Geography of Christmas

21 DECEMBER

*Why* does Luke mention the geographical details of Jesus' birth?

*So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. Luke 2:4*

I like maps. Maps don't scold me when I make a wrong turn like my GPS does. Maps just quietly show me the right way.

I also like a good set of Bible maps in each Sunday school room. In Sunday school teachers' meetings, I always pointed out the geographical location of cities, countries, rivers, lakes, oceans, mountains, and so on, for each of the Bible stories for the coming weeks of Sunday school.

Why?

Maps show geographical details. Geographical details help establish the historical reality of all the stories of the Bible.

Why does Luke mention the geographical details of the birth of Jesus?

Nazareth, Galilee, Judea, Bethlehem, and Judah are not make-believe cities and countries from a make-believe story. Luke mentions these places so that we remember that the story of Jesus' birth is a real story with real people going to real places. The Christmas story is a real story of how God took away the punishment of hell through the birth of Jesus.

Nazareth, Galilee, Judea, and Bethlehem are real places that can still be located on a map.

The geographical details of the Christmas story are real. So, the details of Jesus' story are real. So, the truths of the Christmas story are real. Mary was a virgin. Jesus was the Son of the Most High God who

became man through the miracle of the virgin birth. Jesus was a man so he could suffer and die for your many sins. Jesus was God so his suffering death could atone for all your sins and for the sins of the world.

The Word became flesh: the historical reality of Christmas.

God the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to include the geographical details of Jesus' birth to help us remember this is a real story about real places with real people. The geographical details help us to rejoice that the forgiveness of our sin is also real, and our future home in heaven is a real place.

**Dear Jesus, though the world sees Christmas as a quaint story, help me to remember that it is a real story with real people and real places so that I rejoice that my forgiveness is real and my home in heaven is also a real place. Amen.**

*Rev. Joel Thomford serves Martin Luther College as an admissions counselor.*





## When was Jesus born?

*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. Luke 2:6*

For centuries Christians have celebrated Christmas on December 25. However, we do not know if that is the actual date of Jesus' birth. The Bible does not list that date. Scholars have proposed numerous ideas for the origin of December 25. Some say early Christians believed that Jesus was born on that day. Others say Christians chose that day to counter a pagan festival. However, no one knows for sure the exact date of Jesus' birth.

Nevertheless, we know Jesus' birth to be a historical reality, not a fairy tale or myth. The Son of God entered real human history. Luke tells us that Mary gave birth to Jesus while she and Joseph

were in Bethlehem (*Luke 2:6*). According to Luke, they had gone there in obedience to Caesar Augustus' decree. God's angels testified to it, and the shepherds saw it with their own eyes (*Luke 2:8-16*). God provided these reliable witnesses to show that his Son indeed entered our world.

What is more, we know the reason the Son of God became man and entered our world. Standing before Pontius Pilate, Jesus said, "The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth" (*John 18:37*). The truth is that all people are sinful by nature and sin against God in their thoughts, words, and actions. We all do those things that we should not do, and we fail to do those things that we should do. We all deserve eternal punishment. We all need a Savior.

We also know that Jesus is that Savior. Galatians 4:4-5 states: "When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,

to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship." According to God's plan, Jesus was born of Mary so that he could live under God's law perfectly for us. He also shared in our humanity so that he could pour out his lifeblood to atone for our sins.

No, we do not know the exact date of Jesus' birth. Nevertheless, we can praise God on December 25 and every day for sending a Savior, his Son.

**Lord God, thank you for sending your Son into this fallen world to redeem us from sin. Let this true and certain news be our joy and strength on every day of the year. Amen.**

*Rev. Brian Hennig serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology and social sciences.*

# No Room

What's a manger, and  
what's its significance?

*And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. Luke 2:7*

Most of us have a manger scene. They come as small as tree ornaments and as big as blow-up lawn decorations. Every year we are amazed by the beautiful and romanticized art of this birth. Maybe if we stopped calling it a manger scene, but instead an “animal feeding trough scene,” we might remember its significance and lack of earthly beauty.

Our holy and perfect God, our eternal and all-powerful King, made himself nothing. He came to empty himself of all the appearance of the almighty God that he could be born to a lowly virgin in

a little town called Bethlehem. Because of Caesar Augustus’ decree, that little town was overcrowded by one of the biggest “family reunions” in history. So much so that no one could even make a single room for the visibly pregnant Mary. When the time came, Mary gave birth to the one through whom all things were made. She wrapped the Prince of Peace in simple cloths instead of a royal robe. She placed the Word made flesh in a manger, an animal feeding trough, because they found no kingly crib on which to lay his head.

That little Lord Jesus would grow and become strong. He would be filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him. But life did not get easier for him. The devil and the world wanted nothing to do with him. They wanted him dead and gone forever. Jesus was beaten, flogged, and nailed to a tree until dead, seemingly gone forever. But he is not gone. His lowly death was in place of our

eternal death. His resurrection now gives us life.

At that manger scene, we see how God sent our Lord Jesus to be near us and to stay close by us forever. He loves and blesses all his dear children in his tender care. He will take us to heaven to live with him there. There is not a lowly feeding trough or simple cloths waiting for you in heaven, but a royal room prepared for you and robes of righteousness ready to be wrapped around you forever.

**O Jesus Christ, your manger is  
my paradise at which I am reclining.  
For there, O Lord, we find the Word  
made flesh for us—  
your grace is brightly shining. Amen.**  
(CW 342:1)

*Rev. Philip Schroeder serves Martin  
Luther College as an instructor and  
dormitory supervisor.*





# In the Fields Nearby

Why did the angels appear to shepherds?

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. Luke 2:8*

What a peaceful scene: shepherds in the fields, bright stars twinkling in the velvet sky, a silent night. But let's paint a different picture of the first Noel than what might be on the front of a Christmas card. Let's set aside any sentimental feelings that might cause us to romanticize the status of shepherds in first-century Palestine.

Shepherds were among the lowest of the social classes. They were not the owners of the flocks or the fields. At night, those people were asleep in the comfort of their homes. Shepherds were low-paid wage earners. Their work kept them in continual contact with dirty, smelly sheep.

with sheep manure, with the blood of cut and scraped sheep, and with the insects that buzzed around them. Their work made them ceremonially unclean, so they were treated as outsiders.

In addition, shepherds were considered dishonest. There was the ongoing temptation to make a little money on the side by selling some wool or perhaps a sheep or two. To buy wool, milk, or a lamb from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property. Many shepherds were less than honest and earned their poor reputations, while others were victims of stereotyping. Shepherds, marginalized by the social and religious elite, were way down on society's totem pole.

How surprising—how wonderful!—that the Father picked lowly shepherds to first hear the news of the birth of his Son: “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he

is the Messiah, the Lord” (*Luke 2:10-11*). This was no ordinary birth, because this was no ordinary baby. He was indeed a real baby, a crying, hungry baby that had to be diapered. But that baby was God in the flesh, the Savior, Christ the Lord, who would live and die and rise to take away the sin of the world.

Our sin gave us low status, lower than shepherds, the lowest status possible—as lost and condemned creatures. But the good news is for us, and it causes us great joy. Christ, the Savior, is born!

**Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,  
prepare a bed, soft, undefiled  
within my heart, made clean and new,  
a quiet chamber kept for you. Amen.**  
(CW 331:13)

*Rev. Dr. Lawrence Olson serves  
Martin Luther College as a professor of  
theology and director of both the Staff  
Ministry Program and the Congregational  
Assistant Program.*





## Where is this promised peace on earth?

*[The angels sang.] “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Luke 2:14*

So where is it?

These devotions trace scriptural assertions of the historical reality of history’s greatest miracle. It’s the reality that God’s eternal Son was made flesh within the body of a real virgin, at a precise moment in history, in a traceable town on the map. Concrete realities all. So, if all these are realities of God tangibly entering human history, where’s this peace on earth about which angels sang? As war continues in Ukraine, as sabers rattle across Asia, as polarization in the United States exposes cultural fault lines, where’s this peace on earth?

Don’t misunderstand the angels’ proclamation! The baby whose birth we celebrate sobered us years later with what to expect in a fallen world: “In this world you will have trouble” (*John 16:33*). “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (*Matthew 10:34*). Christmas’s message—a Savior from sin born for us—stirs hostility in every human heart that refuses to see the depth of its sin or its need for a Savior. Even for believers, the ongoing battle against our natural hearts, and the guilty conscience that results when we stumble, make peace on earth seem far from us.

So where is the peace of Christmas?

Right where it’s always been, dear Christian! The peace of Christmas is no mere feeling in our hearts. It certainly isn’t found in any goodwill of sinful humanity—a most unhistorical mirage!

Peace on earth is found in a flesh-and-blood baby in the manger.

Peace is found in God’s merciful goodwill to a fallen world. Peace is found in Jesus’ perfection, lived in the dusty streets of Galilean and Judean villages, that the Father credits to us. Peace is found at that pinnacle moment of history when the Word made flesh sheds his blood for every sin that otherwise robs us of peace.

Despite the ongoing noise of a world at war with God and each another, despite the ongoing clamor of the battle within our hearts, peace is found where the angels pointed. Peace is the glorious reality of the Word made flesh.

There is your Christmas peace!

**Fix my eyes, dear Jesus, on the gracious realities of your manger, life, and cross. In you, the Word made flesh, teach me ever more to rest at peace in this troubled world. Amen.**

*Rev. Dr. Richard Gurgel serves Martin Luther College as president.*





Cover and page 5: *The Manger* - Oil paint and carved text on panel



Page 8: *Nativity* - Oil paint on panel



Page 11: *Worship Christ the Newborn King* - Oil paint and metallic powder on panel



Page 12: *Song of Simeon* - Oil paint on panel



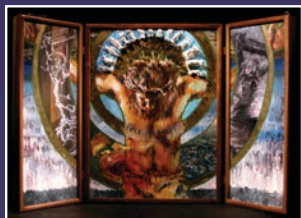
Page 17: *Emmanuel* - Pencil and chalk on toned paper



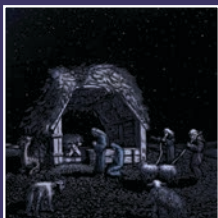
Page 22: *True Flesh* - Woodblock Print on panel



Page 27: *The Tree of Life* - Oil Paint on panels



Page 30: *Do You Know What I Have Done to You* - Oil Paint, metallic powder, and apple cores on panels



Page 35: *Emmanuel Lux* - Scratchboard with digital color



Page 36: *Heavenly Host* - Ink and digital

## A Note on the Art

*We are grateful to Jason Jaspersen for his beautiful art adorning our pages.*

## CREATED TO CREATE

Jason Jaspersen has been producing a diverse portfolio of art for the past 25 years. His creative work includes public monuments, painted murals, woodblock prints, Japanese ink paintings, sand animations, illustrations, motion graphics, and stacks of sketchbooks. Despite crossing into varied materials and methods, his portfolio has a consistent strain toward internalized Christian themes. He wrestles invisible qualities of the Christian faith into stimulating visuals for renewed contemplation. Jason's paintings, sculptures, and prints can be found around the United States in private and public settings.

A lifelong learner, Jason believes in personal growth. He gets a bit leery of too much comfort and likes to find new challenges in media, methods, and narrative. While he has a deep admiration for millennia of art history, he remembers that all art was once new. To make art that authentically speaks to this generation and remains relevant for the future, Jason carefully brings elements of the past into today's forms and addresses universal aspects of the human condition.

Jason regularly advocates for the intersection of creativity and Christianity at conferences, podcasts, presentations, and blog posts. He currently splits his time working as a studio artist and as a studio art professor at Bethany Lutheran College. Apprenticeship inquiries are welcome.



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