

The Lutheran WITNESS

DECEMBER 2004

VOL. 123 NO. 11



*PUTTING GOD
IN A BOX*





The Lutheran WITNESS

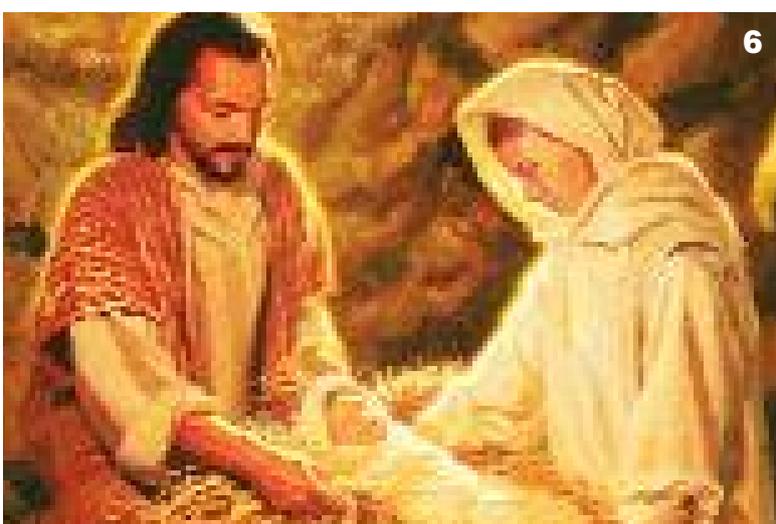
A MAGAZINE FOR THE LAYPEOPLE OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH — MISSOURI SYNOD

DECEMBER 2004

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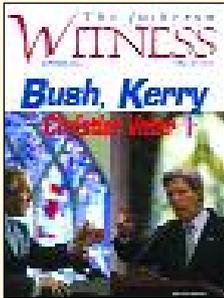
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Bush and Kerry

I find it very difficult to understand how Lutherans could confess the Creed on Sunday, then vote on Tuesday for a candidate who facilitates and condones the killing of unborn children.

Jay A. Nenninger
Sulphur Springs, Texas

Legal concerns (see the editor's note at the end of the first section of letters) and the production schedule for The Lutheran Witness precluded publication of letters responding to the October cover article before the Nov. 2 national election. We offer some of those responses now.—Ed.

I WAS EXTREMELY DISAPPOINTED IN “Bush, Kerry and the Christian Voter” (Oct. '04). The reason is that the issues of tax cuts, social justice, the war in Iraq and poverty were presented as moral equivalents to abortion and homosexual unions. Certainly, Christians can disagree on the best approach to the former issues, but in regard to the latter, God's Word is clear.

Rev. John O. Grein
Swanville, Minn.

I CAN UNDERSTAND THE CHURCH 1) recommending that we vote as our Christian duty and that we study the issues adequately in order to make a proper vote, or 2) coming all out for George Bush because he is the Christian in the race. But I believe you allowed two liberal professors to cloud the issues and give Kerry much more credit than he deserves.

Maryann Pringle
Devine, Texas

BASED ON CHRISTIAN ETHICS: HEADS it's Bush; tails it's Kerry.

Rev. Mark Goble
Memphis, Tenn.

ABORTION IS THE BRUTAL, BLOODY AND painful murder of an unborn child. If the Christian would find it unconscionable to say to a candidate, “I disagree with your views in favor of

a man's right to choose to rape a woman, but where do you stand on health care?” then would it not also be morally unacceptable to say, “I disagree with your views supporting the brutal murder of our children, but where do you stand on welfare reform”? If a candidate for public office supports murdering children, then it does not matter where he stands on any other issue.

Dr. James Lamb
Executive Director
National Lutherans For Life
Nevada, Iowa

ONE ASSUMES THAT PROFESSORS WALZ and Burkee are aware that all manner of stem cell research is being actively pursued in the United States, not restrained by any government ban. But possibly one assumes too much. What is banned is taxpayer funding of killing nascent human entities in order to harvest “embryonic” stem cells from them.

As for deciding whom to vote for, possibly my simple-minded approach overlooks certain “complexities” and “nuances,” but I am unable absolutely to vote for a candidate for president whose long-standing public record is marked by unswerving support for unrestrained abortion, no matter how beneficial I may believe his promised tax and monetary prescriptions would be for my personal investment portfolio.

Leonard C. Johnson
Moscow, Idaho

MANY EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS SEE and hear President Bush proclaiming the Republican platform of “pro-life”

and “anti-gay,” core family values that every Christian must endorse! But stop! Isn't truth telling (Eighth Commandment) also a Christian value? How do we, the Christian community, endorse his presidency when he lied when he stated that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction” and now has the American nation entrapped in a war in which our American soldiers are seen by the Iraqi public as intruders, not liberators?

Dr. Thomas Oie
Appleton, Wis.

I WAS EXPECTING ENCOURAGEMENT to vote for the candidate whose moral values are not in contrast to our Lutheran doctrine on abortion, same-sex marriage, euthanasia—all of which are listed in Scripture as sinful and wrong. Not one mention was made of God's directions to us concerning these areas.

Dr. Wayne Galler
Hot Springs Village, Ark.

The article as prepared for publication included this paragraph: “The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has taken official positions that ‘since abortion takes a human life, abortion is not a moral option, except as a tragically unavoidable byproduct of medical procedures necessary to prevent the death of another human being, viz., the mother’; that ‘any technique or method of human cloning that results in the destruction of human embryos or the creation of human embryos for the purpose of fetal tissue research ...’ is contrary to God's Word; and affirming ‘on the basis of Scripture, marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman.’”

This paragraph was removed late in production upon the advice of legal counsel that publishing it would send a “signal” to our readers on how to vote, as the article noted that John Kerry had taken the opposite position in each case. To send such a signal, according to legal counsel, would have jeopardized

both the Synod's tax-exempt status and its eligibility to receive tax-deductible contributions—Ed.

Different takes

THE ARTICLE WAS PRESENTED AS “CHOICES from a Christian perspective,” but it seemed to me to have a pro-Kerry bias.

*Don Reeb
Estes Park, Colo.*

THANK THE LORD YOU DID NOT TAKE SIDES on this presidential campaign. I am a Republican, and I have no use for John Kerry.

*Paul W. Beckenhauer
West Point, Neb.*

I HAVE JUST RECEIVED THE OCTOBER *Lutheran Witness*. Is the Lutheran church telling the members to vote for Bush? I think they are, and the church has no place in government! I am president of a political group of women, and I take offense to this article.

*Marjorie Cathey
Montalba, Texas*

I AM ANGRY ALMOST BEYOND WORDS! The mission of the “visible church” is spreading the Gospel, not politics.

*Dianah Zehetner
Clarksville, Texas*

I WAS REALLY DISAPPOINTED. I THOUGHT WE were going to get some direction on what our church leadership felt about this election. Instead, all I got out of the article was a comparison on issues that I can get out of any newspaper. Your article wasted my time.

*Bruce Bullerman
Plain City, Ohio*

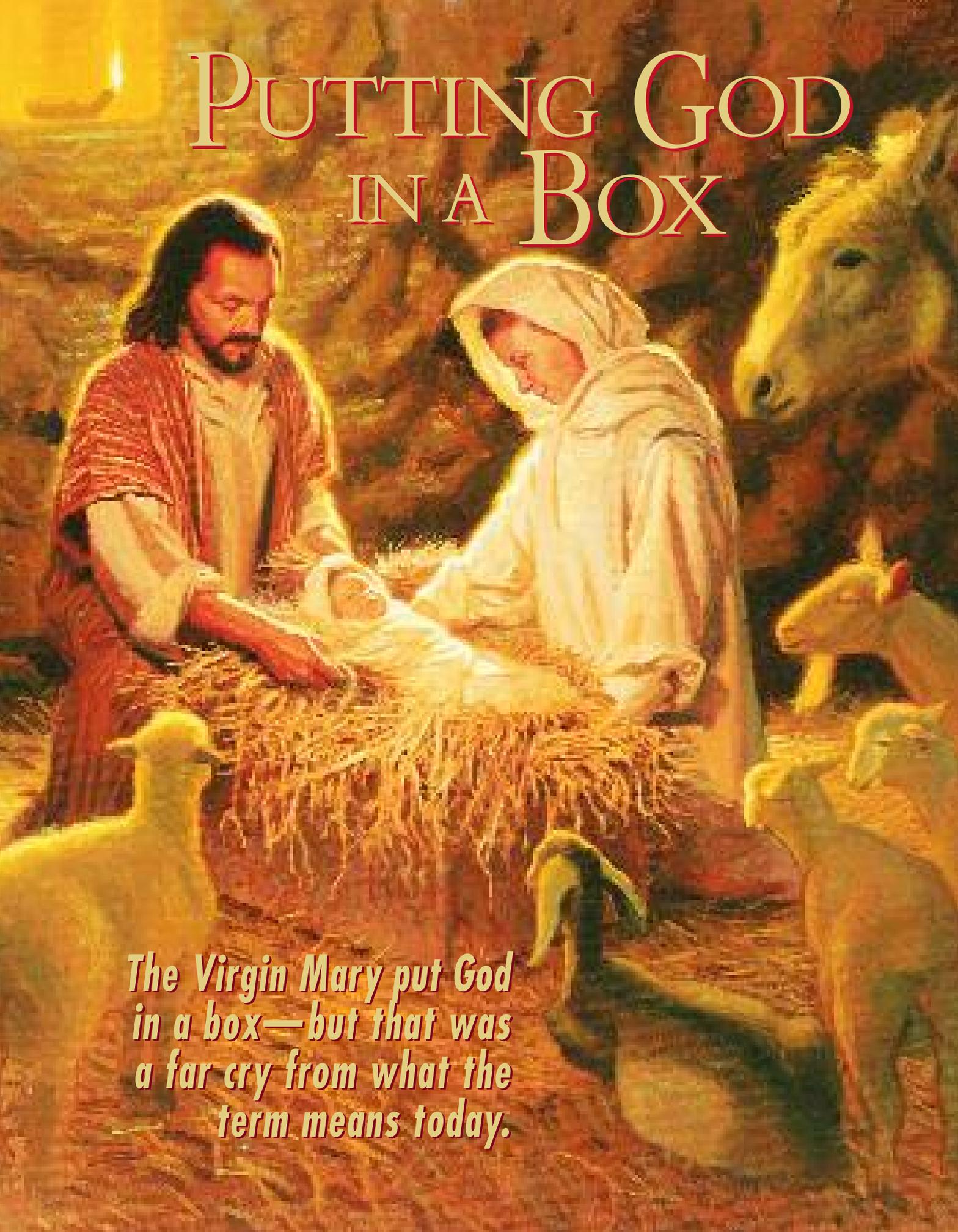
I WAS PLEASED TO SEE SUCH A BALANCED article. God is neither a Democrat nor a Republican, and the answers to this world's problems ultimately are not likely to be resolved in any election.

*Scott Janke
San Marcos, Texas*

I SUPPOSE THAT AS A CHRISTIAN PUBLICATION you don't wish to be too political. If that is the case, maybe you should remain completely silent.

*Joel Oberdieck
Truman, Minn.*

PUTTING GOD IN A BOX



*The Virgin Mary put God
in a box—but that was
a far cry from what the
term means today.*

BY TODD WILKEN

You can't put God in a box!

How often have you heard that? Perhaps you have said it yourself. Usually when we say, "You can't put God in a box," we mean that it is impossible to limit what God can do. That is true enough.

However, nowadays "you can't put God in a box" has become the creed of religious relativism—the notion that all religious beliefs are a matter of perspective, that all religions are equally valid and that no one religion possesses absolute truth. For example, I recently saw a bumper sticker that read, "My God is too big to fit into your religion." The point being that God cannot be known through any one religion, and that every religion (including Christianity) offers, at best, only partial knowledge of God.

At first glance, you might be tempted to agree. After all, we Christians believe that God *is* big-infinite, in fact. Perhaps you *can't* put God in a box. Perhaps He is too big to fit into any one religion, even Christianity. King Solomon said: "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heavens cannot contain You" (1 Kings 8:27, NKJV).

Mary put God in a box

But look again at the familiar account of our Savior's birth. Luke tells us how Joseph and Mary came to Bethlehem. Then he writes:

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger (Luke 2:6–7).

The mother of our Lord took her newborn son, God in the flesh, and laid Him in a box, a feeding trough. Mary put God in a box—literally.

Is this just a clever twisting of words? No it isn't.

While Mary was laying her baby in the manger, the angel was announcing His birth to the shepherds. The angel told the shepherds that if they went to Bethlehem and looked into that manger, they would find God in the flesh:

For there is born to you this day in the city of David

a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger (Luke 2:11–12, NKJV).

There's more. Before Mary laid God in the manger, Mary held God in her arms. For nine months prior to that, Mary carried God in her womb. Nine months earlier, Mary had heard and believed the angel's words:

Behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end. (Luke 1:31–33, ESB). (See also Matt. 1:20–23; Is. 9:6–7.)

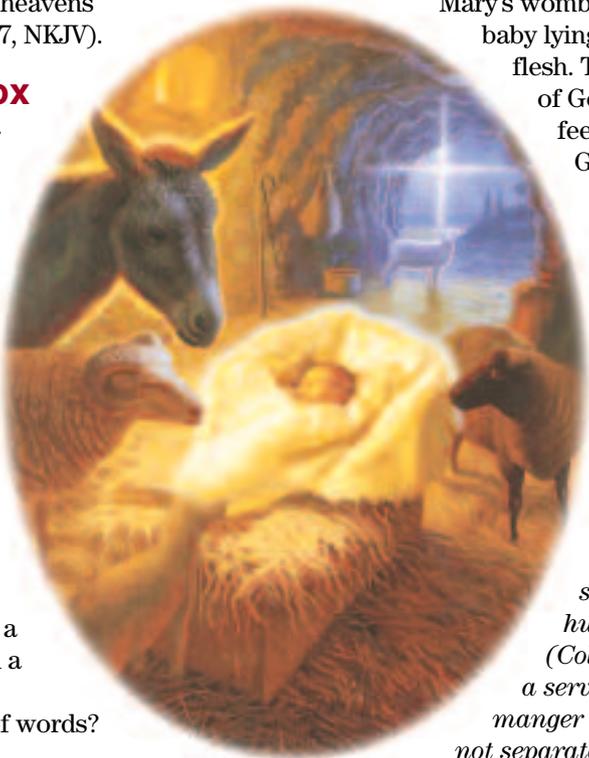
Right then and there in Mary's womb, King Solomon's question, "Will God indeed dwell on the earth?" was answered. Yes, God will dwell on earth. The God whom "the heaven and the highest heavens cannot contain" will not only dwell on earth, He will take up residence first in Mary's womb.

St. Paul writes of Jesus, "In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Col. 2:9, NASB). The baby in Mary's womb, the baby in Mary's arms and the baby lying in the manger is God in the flesh. There at Bethlehem, the fullness of God was found in a box at Mary's feet. Luther wrote: "I know of no God but this One in the manger. ..."

If you will have joy, bend yourself down to this place. There you will find that boy given for you who is your Creator, lying in a manger. I will stay with that boy as He sucks, is washed, and dies. There is no joy but in this boy. Take Him away and you face the Majesty which terrifies. I know of no God but this One in the manger. Do not let yourself be turned away from this humanity. What wonderful words (Col. 2:9)! He is not only a man and a servant, but that person lying in the manger is both man and God essentially, not separated one from the other, but as born of a virgin. If you separate them, the joy is gone.

O You boy, lying in the manger, You are truly the God who has created me, and You will not be wrathful with me because You come to me in this loving way—a more loving way cannot be imagined.

Luther's Christmas Sermon, 1527





The truth is, God cannot be truly known apart from that God in the flesh, that God in a box, that baby in the manger.

Against the claims of religious relativism, Scripture declares that the Triune God has revealed Himself in all His fullness in bodily form in Jesus Christ. To know Jesus is to know God, and apart from Jesus God cannot truly be known (John 1:14,18; 5:37–38; 14:6–9; 15:21–24; 1 John 4:6 and 2 John 1:9).

This is how God is *with us*—in the human flesh of Jesus. More than that, this is how God is *for us*—in the human flesh of Jesus.

It pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness

should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself; by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross (Col. 1:19–20, NKJV).

Jesus traveled the path of the Virgin's womb to the cross. He came, God and man, so that He might make peace between God and man at the cross.

Just as God lay in the manger, so God hung on the cross. Just as God lay in the manger, so God lay in the tomb. Just as God lay in the manger, so God came out of the tomb alive to stand among His disciples. Just as God lay in the manger, so God ascended in glory and will return to raise the dead and judge the world.

He is here with us

But Jesus is no longer in the manger. Jesus is no longer on the cross. Jesus is no longer in the tomb. Where is our God in the flesh to be found today? Solomon's question remains, "Will God indeed dwell on the earth?" And the answer remains the same.

Yes, God will dwell on earth. God is still among us as He was in Mary's womb, in Mary's arms and in the manger. God is still among us as He was on the cross, in the tomb and, raised from the dead, among His disciples.

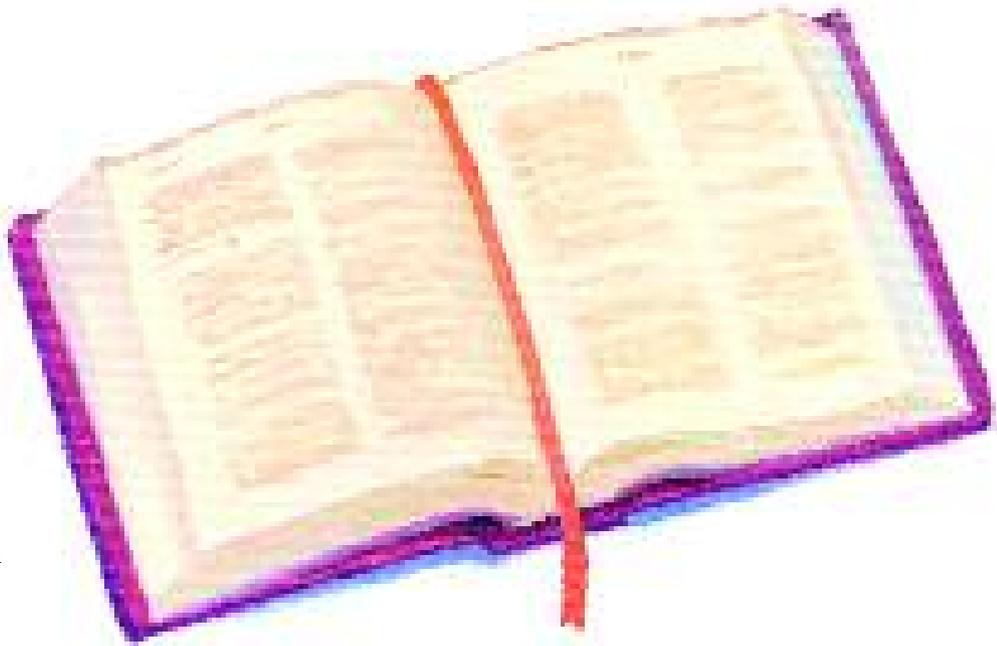
Every Sunday, Jesus speaks these words at His Supper, "This is my body given for you. ... This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:19–20).

Is this just a clever twisting of words? No it isn't.

The same body that was in Mary's womb, in Mary's arms, in the manger, on the cross, in the tomb, resurrected among the disciples and is sitting at the right hand of God is in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Still today, this is how God is *with us*; this is how God is *for us*.

Paul tells us: "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Cor. 11:26, NKJV). This is true. As often as we receive the Lord's Supper, Jesus' conception, birth, death and resurrection for sinners are proclaimed. And as often as these things are proclaimed, they are delivered. Forgiveness, life and salvation are found nowhere else but in Jesus, God in the flesh.

The words of the Christmas hymn sing not only of Christmas day, but of every Sunday, every Lord's Supper:



The same body that was in Mary's womb, in Mary's arms, in the manger, on the cross, in the tomb, resurrected among the disciples and is sitting at the right hand of God is in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.
Hail th' incarnate deity.
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.*

The angel told the shepherds that if they went to Bethlehem and looked into the manger, they would find God in the flesh.

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child (Luke 2:15–17).

This Christmas, you won't find Jesus in the manger, or on the cross or in the tomb. You will only find Jesus where He has promised to be found. You will find Jesus wherever His incarnation, death and resurrection for sinners is purely proclaimed and rightly delivered. You will find Jesus in His Word and His sacraments. And, just like the shepherds, where you find Jesus, you find God—God in the flesh, God with you, God for you.



Rev. Todd Wilken is host of the nationally syndicated radio program "Issues, Etc." and its weekday edition in St. Louis on radio station KFYO-AM.

DOUBT, FEARS AND FAITH

What can we do about the doubts and fears that can beset us as Christians?

BY CRAIG PARROTT

This article is adapted from two of the 14 “letters” in the author’s book For the Faint of Heart: Hope for the Hurting, which he wrote with the hope “that hearts and minds will be redirected to God’s promises and to His Grace.”

“Michelle” is fictional, and the author suggests the reader insert his or her own name when reading these letters. —Ed.



With such troubling doubts and fears, am I still a Christian?

Dear Michelle,

Unfortunately, it is quite common in the church today for people to parade about as if they had no worries or wonderings. As a sign of “strong faith,” people seem to put on airs that they have a firm hold on life.

Compound this false front with the fact that very few people—even Christians—risk getting close enough to others to become naked before them. What if they find out what I am really like? What if they see that I am really a small, frightened little boy inside a man’s body? What if they discover the intense struggles I have with vile thoughts? What if they discover how much I don’t know and how much uncertainty lies within my heart over the things I think I know?

A Christian counselor once opened my eyes with the words, “I would rather be a sincere, mediocre Christian than a fake good one.” As I have traveled a little farther down

seasons of intense suffering and doubting.

One of the most profound and influential persons in my life (yes, he was a friend with whom my soul was stripped bare) told me that life is a good proving ground for faith. He encouraged me to let myself feel pain and to admit fears. He said the more I long, ache, and groan, the more I will thirst for God and the next world. He was right.

By now, perhaps, you are beginning to see that doubts and fears can draw us closer to, rather than drive us farther from God. We often have a misguided view of growth. We think it means feeling better or improving somehow. Growth might be seeing ourselves as God accepts us in Christ. We are no longer under condemnation (Rom. 8:1), and we are “without blemish and free from accusation” (Col. 1:22).

Rather than resting in answers, we should be even more content to rest

promise, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). In my life, I have more fervently sought after God when I was beset with all sorts of troubling doubts and fears. A cursory glance at Scripture will reveal that you and I are in good company.

Jeremiah, Job, David, Moses, Abraham and Paul all faced huge question marks in their lives. Three times Paul asked God to take away his thorn in the flesh. God responded, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Paul concluded that when he had come to the end of his own resources, it was then that he had found his real strength in Christ. You seem to be in a similar place, Michelle. Perhaps you pray often what the father with the possessed son asked of Jesus, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). I know it has been a favorite petition of mine over the years.

Your question leads us to one of the least discussed truths about our Christian journey in this world: we are at war. Far from the misguided worldly view that Christianity is just another path to peace and prosperity in this life, the real story of a Christian is often the opposite. Our sinful flesh and new spirit rage against each other within us. Inner tension and turmoil persist in the minds and hearts of Christians fighting the good fight. Contradictions and conflicting voices are all around.

Rom. 7:14–25 is an excellent description of this battle. This struggle, this back-and-forth teeter tottering, is not experienced by unbelieving captives—P.O.W.s—prisoners of the world. Think about the implications of this last statement and your question, Michelle.

Be on guard against this temptation from the flesh: putting faith in your faith. The object of our faith—

The fact that you are now struggling with such a fear, I think, is a good sign. It shows that you know what is most important in life.

life’s path, I have discovered that “real” people don’t have all the answers. They don’t even flinch when they say, “I don’t know.”

It’s as if they have grown more comfortable than the “average” human with life’s mysteries.

And almost without exception, the most-real people I have met have experienced

in Him who has all the answers! There is a profound difference between the two. The former will not quench our thirst or lead us to peace. “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me” (Jer. 9:23–24a).

Later, Jeremiah declares God’s

Jesus—is far more important than the amount of faith we have. As Paul says in 2 Cor. 3:5: “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.” This is also why Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move” (Matt. 17:20).

I like to use this analogy with students: If half the class put great, infinite trust in me to take a calculus test for them (I didn’t advance beyond algebra!), and the other half put feeble, hardly visible trust in the class valedictorian, who would be better off after the tests are graded?

Look at the One in whom you and I place our weak and puny faith. He created this universe by speaking. He sent a worldwide flood. He walked on water. He raised the dead. He rose from the dead. And He invites you and me to cast all our cares on Him, for He cares about us! Read 1 Peter 5:7.

And He promises, after we have presented our requests to Him, that His peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. See what He tells you and all who trust in Him in Phil. 4:6–7. He is faithful and He will do it.

I hope in my next letter to delve further into your concern. For now, let us cling to God’s precious promises in His Word.

Your fellow warrior, sometimes battered and bloodied, but always and ultimately on the winning side,

Craig

P.S. “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all” (Ps. 34:18–19).

“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Matt. 12:20).

I am afraid of losing my faith. How can I prevent that?

Dear Michelle,

To lose one’s faith is the scariest thought for us to have. After all, it has eternal consequences. To lose our Savior and Lord is to lose everything. Without Him we have nothing: no love, no hope, no joy, no peace, no future, no purpose. And yet, the fact that you are now struggling with such a fear, I think, is a good sign. It shows that you know what is most important in life. You know that something far worse could happen to you than your present tribulation.

You have pinpointed the heart of the real fight in this world: Am I going to trust myself, or trust God? Our flesh is always seeking the program that works or the plan that is foolproof. It is a subtle effort to avoid having to lean on God, even if we piously ask Him to show us the way. He *is* the way (John 14:6). It is so easy to forget that fact.

What suffering eventually shows us is that we can’t control our life. We can’t control others. We can’t control circumstances. Such a proposition is at first extremely frightening. (Remember, we creatures like to feel in control!) However, over time such realization liberates us adopted children to trust God and love others. Our time and energy is much better utilized doing those two things than trying to do the impossible: control the uncontrollable.

Looking to our weak selves and our own feeble efforts would guarantee nothing but uncertainty (“Have I done enough?”) or despair (“I can’t do what needs to be done!”). Granted, there might be moments of pride when we experience brief successes of meeting some legalistic standard. Eventually, however, we will second-guess even our best

efforts. So, is it clear that we can’t prevent ourselves, or anyone else for that matter, from losing faith? The Good News is that “what is impossible with men is possible with God” (Luke 18:27). Fortunately, He has given us some pretty weighty assurances in His Word.

“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:28–29).

“He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8).

“Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Cor. 1:21–22).

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2a).

“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6).

Our salvation, from start to finish, seems to be God’s doing and responsibility. That is a good thing! With men it would be impossible, but with God all things are possible (Matt. 19:26).

The evil one is always trying to worm his way in and steal some of the glory from God. Satan appeals to our fleshly pride and tempts us to think that we contribute, that we earn, that we have something to do with being saved. Listen to Paul: “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our

righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord’” (1 Cor. 1:30–31).

I have a final thought on this question, Michelle. If you read the first chapter of Genesis slowly—especially verses 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14, 15—you will notice a repeating pattern of “And God said,” followed closely by “And it was so.” After almost 10 years of teaching that chapter to high school seniors, it finally dawned on me that such a claim can be made only by God.

Think about it: If God says something, it *will* happen. I can’t make that claim, for I have broken some promises. I don’t know another

human being who can make that claim, either.

Sometimes people have good reasons for not following through on statements made. Illness or bad weather or fatigue or simple forgetfulness wipes out a good intention. And sometimes people have poor reasons for not following through: vengeance, selfishness, and payback come to mind. Not so with God. He is forever faithful and totally trustworthy.

You and I may rest in His loving arms as we go to sleep tonight. The pressure is off. Jesus is carrying our burdens. He has said it, and He will do it!

Being held with you in His grip of grace,

Craig

P.S. “And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).



Craig Parrot teaches at Denver Lutheran High School and is a member of Peace Lutheran Church in Arvada, Colo. His book is available at captivatingrock.com.

*O*ur salvation, from start to finish, seems to be God’s doing and responsibility. That is a good thing!



O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

BY ROBERT E. SMITH

*O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by. ...*

Cradled in the mountains five miles south of Jerusalem, the village of Bethlehem was a quiet little town where people raised sheep for the temple sacrifices for thousands of years.

Read these passages from Scripture, then answer the questions below:

Gen. 48:7; Ruth 1:2, 19–22;
Ruth 4:11; 1 Sam. 16:1–5 and 12–13:
Who is buried there?

Who called Bethlehem home?

What role do they play in God's plan?

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

For another thousand years, Bethlehem remained quiet. Kings clashed and plotted, sometimes moving in and around the town, but nothing much changed. But God had plans for the town. From the following Scripture passages, what does God tell us of His plan?

Gen. 49:10: _____

Ps. 132:11: _____

Is. 7:14 and 9:2–7: _____

Jer. 23:3–6: _____

Micah 5:1–5: _____

*How silently,
how silently
The wondrous Gift
is giv'n!
So God imparts to human
hearts
The blessings of His heav'n.*

Roman rule had brought a period of peace and safety to the Mediter-ranean world. People could travel safely from one end of the Mediter-ranean to the other. The Greek language was spoken by most of its citizens.

Cities such as Rome and Alexandria had grown to perhaps more than one million residents. Commerce surged around the world and a hunger for spiritual things drove many people. The time was just right for God to act.

According to these passages, what did He do?
Rom. 5:6: _____

Gal. 4:4–5: _____

But why Bethlehem? Read these verses and write your answer.

Luke 2:1–7: _____

Matt. 2:2–6: _____

Who came to celebrate the birth?
Matt. 2:1–2: _____

Luke 2:8–20: _____

After the birth of Jesus, Bethlehem went back to sleep.



Once in awhile, a church father would live there and pilgrims would come and go.

Today, Bethlehem is caught in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. There's little peace where the Prince of Peace entered the world.

What kind of peace did the angels announce that first Christmas? What kind of peace has the Church sung about for centuries? Use these verses of Scripture to write your answer:
Is. 53:5, John 14:27, John 16:33 and Phil. 4:7: _____

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
Oh, come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Immanuel!*



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A BLESSED CHRISTMAS ...

We in the Christian Church have many opportunities and challenges in proclaiming the truth and joy of Christmas to a world that has a much different perspective on Christmas than do we in the Christian faith.

For example, in searching the Web for information about Christmas, commercial announcements popped up first, including one advertising a special wine with these words: "This Christmas give presents of hard-to-find, ultra-premium wine delivered monthly as long as you like. A unique and memorable gift." And then there was the one for Christmas at Wal-Mart: "Large assortment and everyday low prices. Shop now!"

Another Web site gave information about Christmas around the world in these words: "In actuality,

layering of sacred and secular observances creates celebrations that vary from nation to nation, and from culture to culture."

For those of us who bear the name "Christian," Christmas is quite simply, but most significantly, the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Jesus, born in Bethlehem in Judea, is the central figure of Christianity. He is the Son of God, divinely conceived by the Holy Spirit and given human birth by Mary, the wife of Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth.

Holy Scripture's message regarding Christmas enables us to meet the challenges and opportunities referenced above. Indeed, proclaiming the truth and joy of Christmas to an unbelieving world is possible only through the Word of God, including the following words that bring "tidings of comfort and joy."

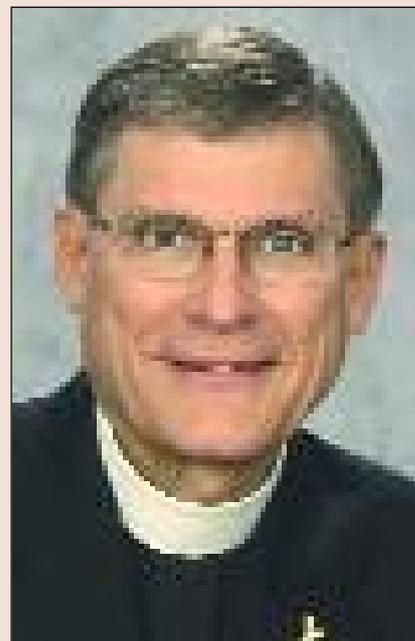
Announcing that Mary would be the mother of Jesus, the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring

forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:30-33, NKJV).

Following the birth of Jesus, the angel said to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is

Christmas customs around the world reflect the variety of cultures that celebrate the holiday. For some people, Christmas is primarily a holy day marked by religious services. For others, gift giving, feasting, and good times figure more prominently. At its root, Christmas celebrates one of the fundamental events of Christianity, the birth of Jesus. However, the celebration of Christmas also incorporates many secular customs that have been handed down through families and borrowed from other cultures. This complex

Proclaiming the truth and joy of Christmas to an unbelieving world is possible only through the Word of God



Christ the Lord. ... And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'" (Luke 2: 10-11, 13, NKJV).

Prophesying the life-giving work of our Savior, the prophet Isaiah wrote, "Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed" (Is. 53:4-5, NKJV).

Terry and I extend to each of you our warmest personal greetings and assurance of our prayers that you and your loved ones will experience the peace that passes all understanding during this blessed season of the year! A blessed Christmas to you all!

Jerry Kieschnick
Lives Transformed through Christ, in Time ... for Eternity!

John 3:16-17

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