

The Lutheran WITNESS

MARCH 2006

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DAYS IN THE DESERT

Also:

Almsgiving: A Lenten Tradition

Loving the Abused

A Gift for Troubled Times

WITNESS

The Lutheran

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Re-Visiting the Magi

'In short, the Magi were not present at Jesus' Nativity. ...'

C.L. Kevan
Pinetop, Ariz.

I READ WITH GREAT INTEREST DR. PAUL L. Maier's article on the Magi ("The Visit of the Magi: Fact or Fiction?"—Jan. '06). Part of my interest stems from the fact that nearly every Nativity scene one sees shows the Magi at the manger with Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus.

The fact is, every Bible translation I have consulted states that the Magi came to a "house" to worship Jesus. In short, they were not at Jesus' Nativity.

The Magi needed time to travel overland to King Herod and then on to the "house," following a Star that didn't appear until Jesus' Nativity. There is no mention of how long it took them to make the journey, but the fact remains that they were not at the manger.

Matthew 2:16 tells us that after the Magi failed to return to Herod, Herod ordered the murder of all male children in the Bethlehem area under the age of two. Since Herod had learned from the Magi the exact time of the appearance of the Star (v. 7), we probably can surmise that Jesus was somewhere between the age of 40 days and 20 months (most likely around 18 months) at the time of the Magi's visit.

The misleading notion that the Magi were present at Christ's birth was not the author's fault. His text was thoughtful, inspiring, and enlightening. Rather, the fault lay with the editors, whose call-out quote read, "As Gentiles, the Magi were our representatives at the Nativity."

C.L. Kevan
Shepherd of the Mountains
Lutheran Church
Pinetop, Ariz.

We asked the author of the story, Dr. Paul L. Maier, to respond to this letter. His reply follows below.—Ed.

That the Magi were not worshipping at the manger is certainly correct. The editors, I assume, used "the Nativity" in the wider sense of everything associated with the birth of Christ. Rather than 18 months later, however, I would conclude that the Magi arrived no earlier than 40 days after the birth of Christ but not much later than that. Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the temple 40 days after His birth, which they would not have done had Herod—the infant killer—sought to terminate Him. On the other hand, a year and a half in Bethlehem would seem too long for two reasons: (1) It's expensive to live away from home, then and now; and (2) this would make Jesus too old at the beginning of His ministry to satisfy Luke's chronological clues. The "two years" to which Matthew refers determines when the Star appeared, not when Jesus was born. The astral event could have preceded Jesus' birth, or Herod might have been told by the Magi that it was only months earlier, and he extended the parameters to two years to make sure Jesus was terminated.—P.L.M.

Remember the letter carrier

I WAS DISTRESSED WHEN I RECEIVED my copy of the January *Lutheran Witness*. The title of the lead story—"The Visit of the Magi: Fact or Fiction?"—was teased on the front

cover. I read the article, but the postal worker who placed the magazine in my mailbox didn't. As our Synod and partner churches around the world strive to reach 100 million people with the Gospel through "Ablaze!," shouldn't the cover of our flagship periodical proclaim the Good News rather than leaving doubts about the veracity of the Bible?"

LeAnn Maddry
Wasilla, Alaska

Who may consecrate?

THE AUTHOR OF FEBRUARY'S "Q&A" question, "Who may consecrate the elements?" is quite right in responding that the validity of the Sacrament depends on the Word of Christ. The body and blood of Christ are given through the Word and promise of Christ, nothing else. However, many among us, I included, believe that the current LCMS practice of using lay ministers in some circumstances is out of step with our confession (Augsburg Confession XIV).

At the very least, the article should have recognized that not all agree with the practice the Synod approved in 1989 at Wichita. This is a matter that must be resolved among us by a return to the confessional practice that a man ought not "publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call" (AC XIV).

The author highlights the role of the priesthood of believers but says nothing about the promise of Christ to provide pastors for His Church. There is a simple solution: If a man is to do pastoral work, call and ordain him!

Much more needs to be said about the necessity of the preaching office to be helpful on this subject. I would hope that *The Lutheran Witness* will provide help in the future to clarify our teaching and our practice. The pastoral office is not an option but the gift and command of Christ (Titus 1:5, Eph. 4:11, et al.) for the sake of the public preaching of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments.

Herbert Mueller, President
Southern Illinois District

Church of Our Lady

AS ONE WHO WATCHED THE DRESDEN *Frauenkirche's* rededication ("A Magnet for Faith," Jan. '06) on German television while in Hannover this past October, I was struck by another sign of rebirth. In the front pews sat the outgoing and incoming chancellors of Germany. Gerhard Schroeder, well known for his unbelief, sat stony faced and sang not a word. Meanwhile, Angela Merkel, Germany's new chancellor (and the daughter of a Lutheran pastor) joyfully sang all the hymns by heart!

*Dr. David Zersen,
President Emeritus
Concordia University at Austin*

THE RESTORATION OF THE *FRAUENKIRCHE* IS an important story for the hundreds of struggling LCMS churches and schools across our nation. Are we as committed to our Christian institutions as the people of Dresden are to theirs? Are we ready to assume financial responsibility and sacrifice as the Dresdners did?

Will we look nowhere other than to ourselves, as forgiven servants called by God, to preserve and promote the Christian faith, or will we sit back smugly, saying, "We've done our part," while the inevitable demise of many churches and schools continues unabated? When the cause is the Gospel of Christ, no cost is too large.

*Rev. Mark Goble
Memphis, Tenn.*

We welcome letters that comment on articles in The Lutheran Witness. Letters may be edited for length and clarity. Send letters to "Letters," c/o The Lutheran Witness, 1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295; or send them via e-mail to Lutheran.Witness@LCMS.org. Please include your name, postal address, and telephone number.

DAYS IN THE DESERT

Jesus' desert experience was much more than a physical test. Satan saw an opportunity to thwart God's eternal plan for all of us.



by Charles T. Knippel

Wilderness survival programs are available for people who want to enter a desert and learn how to survive physically. Jesus' 40-day experience in the wilderness was more than a matter of *physical* survival. It was a critical *spiritual* event that affects us deeply. The Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

During Lent we ponder Jesus' 40 days in the desert because that event provides a formidable basis for our 40-day Lenten observance. Jesus' desert event relates to the center of our Lenten observance—the saving mission of Jesus and our personal Christian growth as we journey through life's deserts.

Israel's 40 years of desert

To gain a fuller understanding of Jesus' temptations, we need to look backward. The Old Testament event most relevant to Jesus' 40 days in the desert is the 40-year wilderness wanderings of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Moses explained to the Israelites God's purposes for their 40-year wanderings. "Remember," Moses said, "how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these 40 years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man

does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut. 8:2–3).

Disobedient to God in many ways, the wandering Israelites needed to learn to depend on God's promises and to trust Him for sustenance and success. They needed to mature in faith and godly living in order to enter and conquer the land God wanted to give them.

God aided them in a variety of ways in spite of their complaints and lack of trust. For example, He miraculously provided them with food and water. God's people were to remember what God had done for them and trust Him. Their journey through the wilderness was much more than a question of survival. It was a matter of growth in the nation's trust and submission to God.

Jesus, the new Israel

Jesus' scriptural references from Deuteronomy throughout His temptations connect Him to the Israelites in the wilderness. Jesus came as the new Israel. Israel showed lack of trust in God and disobedience to Him. Jesus came to be the trusting and obedient Israel.

We see how this role as the new Israel began to play out in His life. After His baptism by John, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the Judean desert to be tempted by the devil.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, He "saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him" (Matt. 4:16). Then "a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son,

whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt. 4:16–17). God the Father testified that Jesus is His well-loved Son and anointed Him with the Spirit. The Father inaugurated Jesus for His Messianic mission to rescue all people from the death-dealing perils of their sins and to give them life abundant and eternal.

Remaining with Jesus, the Spirit led Him into the wilderness and its temptations so that Jesus might clarify the nature of His Messianic work. Like Israel, He was confronted with issues of trust and obedience. He was not led into the desert to see if He was physically fit enough to undertake His mission; rather, He was led there to be tempted in “real time” by the devil in preparation for His saving work.

How can we think of Jesus as being tempted by the devil? After all, He is the Son of God. We need to remember Jesus is true man as well as true God, and He carried out His ministry as a human being. He used His divine powers only when He miraculously served others. Even though He could not sin because of His divine nature, by putting aside the full and continual use of His divine powers according to His human nature, He truly could be, and was, tempted to misunderstand the Father’s plan and to mistrust and disobey the Father’s will (Heb. 4:15).

The first temptation: Loaves from stones

In Matthew’s account of the devil’s temptation attempts (chapter 4, verses 1–11), the first recorded temptation came after Jesus had been fasting in the wilderness for 40 days and nights. He was extremely hungry. Just as he usually does, the devil made his move at a time of weakness. He said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread” (4:2).

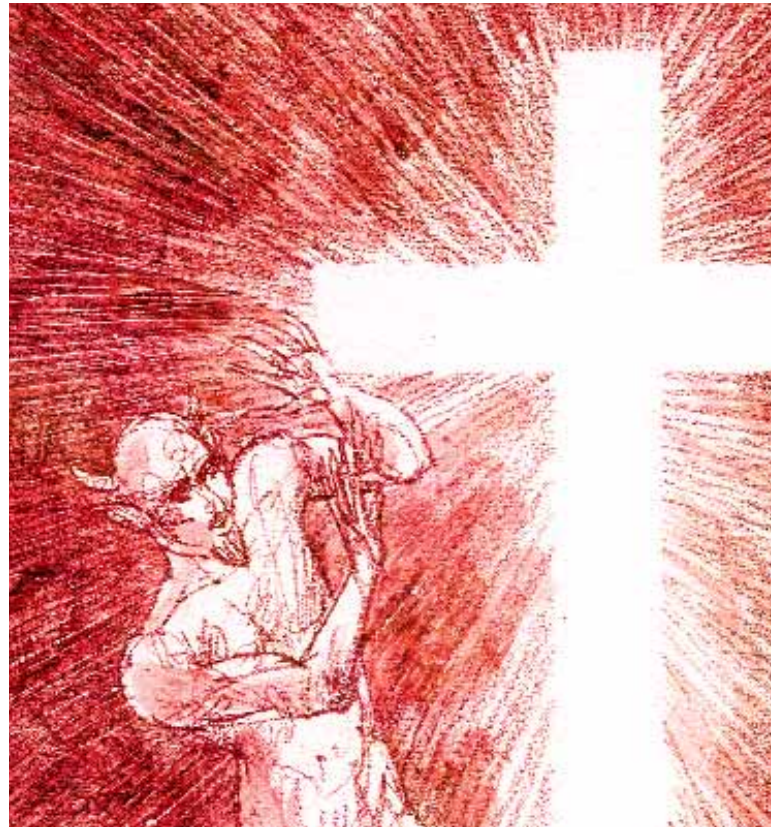
Jesus might have been saying to Himself, “I feel like I’m starving to death,” when the devil tried to get him to sin by proving His Sonship and using His divine prerogatives to turn stones into loaves of bread and satisfy His hunger.

Would Jesus live His life by satisfying physical desires, or would He decide that depending on and obeying God came before satisfying human wants?

Jesus, upon whom the Spirit had come, made His decision. He decided that trusting and obeying God was infinitely more important than the fear of dying of starvation. Jesus did not deny the importance of food but confronted the devil with the very words of Moses to the Israelites: “It is written: ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” What God says and what God says to do are more important than anything else. Jesus definitively made His decision to trust in God above all things and carry on with the Father’s messianic plan.

The second temptation: A theatrical shortcut

Thwarted by Jesus, the devil tried another approach to deter Jesus from His mission. The devil took Jesus to Jerusalem and placed Him on the highest point of the temple and tempted Him to jump. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down.” This time the devil quoted Scripture, implying that if Jesus as God’s Son obeys Scripture so steadfastly, He should obey Psalm 91. God had promised, “He will command his



angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

If Jesus was going to quote Scripture, the devil was going to quote Scripture. This tactic ought to persuade Jesus, thought the devil, to be gullible and do something (or so the devil hoped) fatal to prove He was God’s Son and obedient to God’s Word.

God’s plan for Jesus’ life-renewing mission required perfect obedience to God’s will; a humble, poor, difficult, and demanding life; and rejection by many. Jesus was to experience undeserved suffering, excruciating crucifixion and death without His Father’s protection and help. In God’s plan, the God-man was to trade places with sinful human beings and pay the penalty for our sins before God, so that we might possess forgive-

Satan takes Jesus to the highest pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, which still is on the east side, overlooking the Kidron valley. The drop from there is some 450 feet, which would be a fall that no human could survive.



ness of sins, a right relationship with God, and transformed lives, culminating with resurrection and eternal life.

The devil may have taken advantage of the belief of some Jewish people that the coming Messiah would perform wonders from the temple. If this were the case, people would certainly be overawed at Jesus' astounding performance, since He would land unharmed. Then, people would surely acclaim Him as the Messiah. He could be cheered as the Messiah the easy way.

This must have been a powerful temptation for Jesus. But He didn't fall for it. He told the devil that he was a dreadful interpreter of Scripture. Scripture must be understood in the light of all that it says on a particular subject. Jesus overcame the temptation with scriptural words, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Deut. 6:13). God's promises of protection do not include putting Him to a test.

As difficult as it may have been, Jesus made the hard and fast decision to trust and obey God's every word and to carry forward the painful saving plan carefully devised by His Father.

The third temptation: King for a bow

The devil had one more alluring temptation to present. It had to do with what kind of kingdom the Messiah was to establish. Would it be an earthly kingdom or a spiritual kingdom?

The devil wanted to persuade Jesus that an earthly kingdom was the way to go. Why go for a spiritual kingdom when that way is paved only with humiliation, rejection, suffering, and death? Go the easy way. Go for all good things of this world.

The devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and pretended that he, rather than God, owned everything that Jesus saw. He "showed him the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'"

Certainly, the devil could say to Jesus that the majority of the people seemed to want a kingdom of this world, and that he would help Jesus put it in place. As an earthly king, Jesus would have unlimited honor, riches, and power. He would be able to give relief to the downtrodden, especially from the Roman rule. The people would dearly love and adore Him for it. What could be easier, the devil insisted, than gaining such greatness and glory by simply bowing down and worshiping him? With his lies, the devil wanted Jesus to submit to his rule.

Jesus had the temptation-blasting word for him. Using Deut. 6:13, He responded, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Jesus determined to worship and serve God alone and to usher in the only Kingdom of God that benefits people at their deepest need. He would bring about God's gracious saving rule in the lives of people.

Matthew concludes his account of the temptation with the words, “Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.” It is clear that Jesus’ days in the desert were more than a matter of survival. They were a matter of Jesus overcoming temptations and affirming His resolve to trust and obey the Father for our salvation. Jesus showed Himself to be the new and perfect Israel.

Our days in the desert

The Judean wilderness reminds us of deserts we journey through as Christians. We are called to lives of dependence on God. We are called to obey and to embark on our own pilgrimage of love and service to others. These desert days are marked as challenging, difficult, frightening, confusing, painful times. Often we wonder if we can make it through. We hope against hope that we might at least survive.

The devil surrounds us with hard temptations. He tempts us to abandon our Christian calling, to doubt God’s promises, to despair, to think of only ourselves and our comfort, to take unacceptable shortcuts, and to abandon our Christian principles. The devil presses us hard; we are greatly enticed to try God’s patience and fall for the devil’s lies.

Jesus overcame the devil’s temptations not just for Himself but ultimately for us. He shows us how to confront and overcome the devil’s temptations. By His victory over the devil, He empowers us to triumph over evil.

Lent is a time for spiritual growth. It is a period for us to grow by learning from Jesus and drawing strength from Him. Each of us is in the wilderness in some way. As “wilderness people,” we daily struggle against temptations to sin. Lent is an opportunity for us, as the Holy Spirit leads us, to grow in faith and love and be more than just survivors.

We begin by believing that God allows desert times to

come our way in order to provide us with growth not achievable in other ways. He sometimes exercises His power over evil by using evil, thus enabling us to use evil to produce good in our lives.

How does this work?

When we find ourselves in the wilderness, we have a place to go for growth-enhancing help. Led by the Spirit of God—ours since Baptism—we turn to the Word and promises of God to permit Him to implement Jesus’ victory in our lives. We immerse ourselves in His Word. There we find His promises of love, presence, and protection. There we find the One who overcame the devil for us and faithfully and fully completed His mission to be our Deliverer from sin, death, and the power of Satan.

As we contemplate His sufferings and death, especially during Lent, Jesus Himself strengthens us to overcome the devil and all his works and ways and to live more confidently, obediently, and lovingly—even in the desert.

Now, during Lent, we have the opportunity to tackle our personal wilderness issues and allow God to strengthen our Christian faith and life through His Word and Sacraments.

“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles” (Heb. 12:1–2). “We have [a high priest, Jesus the Son of God], who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb. 4:15–16).

The Christian life is a great deal more than survival. It is the life that overcomes by the Word of God. That Word is Jesus.



Dr. Charles T. Knippel is professor emeritus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He lives in East Alton, Ill.

The Judean wilderness is along the Jordan and the Dead Sea, to the east of Jerusalem. It is a mountainous, rough, and thinly settled country, better suited for pasture than for tilling. John the Baptist preached repentance in the Judean wilderness.

Almsgiving

A LENTEN TRADITION

Gifts of mercy—alms—aren't given because of our mercy for others, but only because Christ has had mercy on us.

by Tom Ries

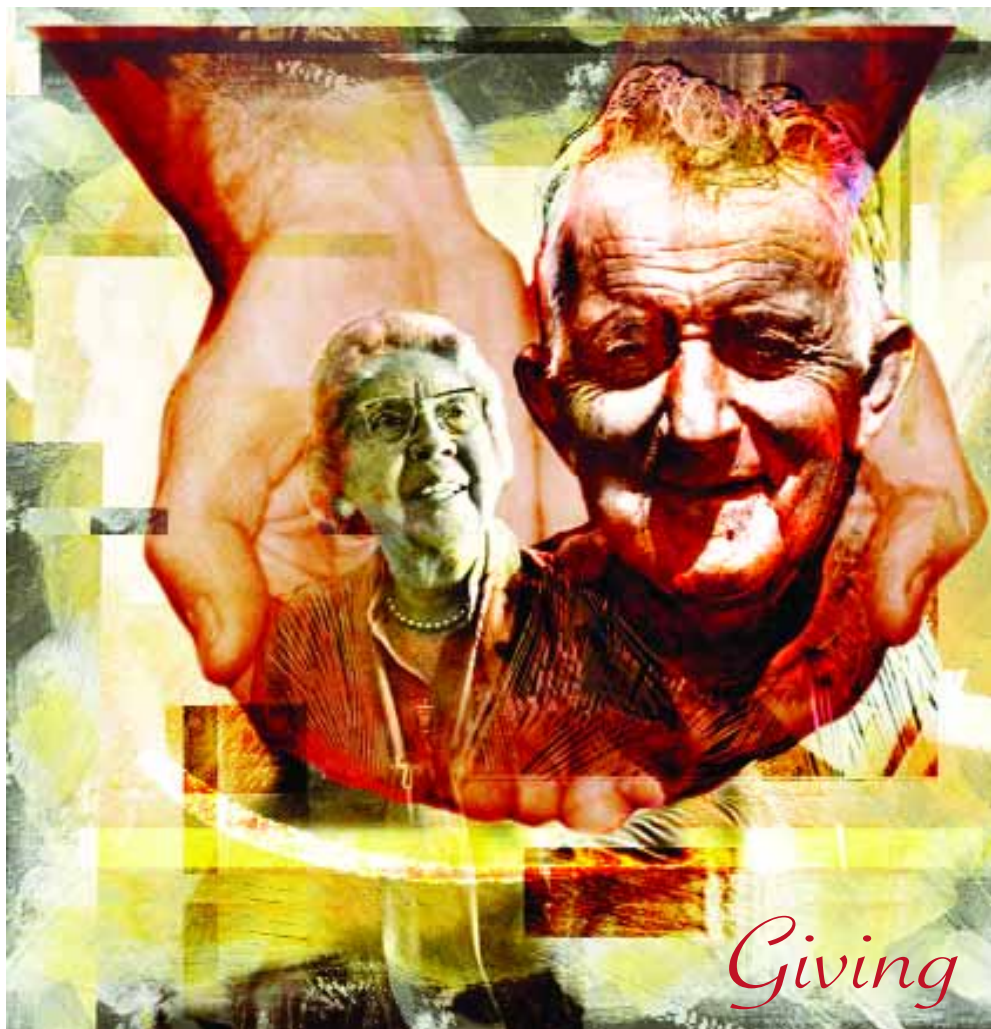
Almsgiving is one of three traditional disciplines in the church's observance of Lent. The other two are prayer and fasting. These long-standing customs are not required of Christians, but they have been used by believers in Christ during the Lenten season for centuries as ways of remembering Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

There are no prescribed methods for exercising these traditions, but many Christians find ways of practicing them during the 40-day period before Easter.

The historic Gospel for Ash Wednesday is Matt. 6:1–6 and 16–21. It was chosen specifically for that day because Jesus comments on these three Lenten disciplines:

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may



be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues

and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to

show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

The common theme in Jesus’ comments on each of these disciplines is His caution against a public display of piety when practicing them. The three disciplines were a healthy part of the Jewish religious

The Lenten practice of almsgiving is not meant to be considered aside from the other disciplines of prayer and fasting.

tradition of Jesus’ day. The Book of Tobit says: “Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving and righteousness.” (The Book of Tobit, or Tobias, is part of the Catholic and the Orthodox Old Testament, but is regarded as apocryphal by Protestants. It tells of a God-fearing Jew named Tobit, living in Nineveh about 700 B.C.)

Nevertheless, the Old Testament practice of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting carried over to the Christian Church. No one knows exactly when these disciplines became associated with the Lenten season, but there are references as early as the fourth century linking them to the remembrance of Christ’s passion.

A quick search of the Internet indicates that there is renewed interest today among Lutheran Christians in practicing spiritual discipline as part of their Lenten observance. But as with any spiritual discipline, these three carried with them the risk of becoming legalistic rituals. And, as with any legalistic ritual, there is the tendency for the practitioner to draw



Fasting

attention to her or his own virtue.

Jesus’ words concerning almsgiving are not a directive or an excuse for His followers to think, “My giving is no one’s business but my own.” In fact, examples of faith-motivated stewardship are lifted up throughout the Scriptures. Offerings by individuals for the building of the original temple are recorded as positive examples in the Old Testament (1 Ch. 29:1–9).

As Jesus watched at the temple as worshipers deposited their gifts into the treasury, He commented that the widow who gave two small coins

gave the greatest gift (Luke 21:1–4).

And in 2 Corinthians 8, the apostle Paul publicly acknowledged the gifts of the Macedonians who pleaded with him for the opportunity to participate in the collection.

But in the matter of giving alms, Jesus advises modesty and privacy.

Martin Chemnitz gave a thorough treatment of almsgiving in his comments on poverty in his *Loci Communes* (system of theology). According to Chemnitz, almsgiving does not encompass the whole of an individual Christian’s life of stewardship, but rather refers specifically to

“gifts of mercy,” given by those who have to those who have not. These gifts of mercy are not gifts motivated by the mercy or pity that the giver has for the receiver. Rather they are gifts motivated by the mercy of Christ present in the life of the giver.

Chemnitz emphasizes this point by noting that a word in the Hebrew Old Testament for “gifts of mercy” is *tsedaqoth*, meaning “righteous-

Almsgiving is a joyous yet quiet act of expressing the righteousness that the giver has received from God, by grace, through faith.

ness” (see Ezekiel 18). Almsgiving is a joyous yet quiet act of expressing the righteousness that the giver has received from God, by grace, through faith. The giver shares his abundance with those in need.

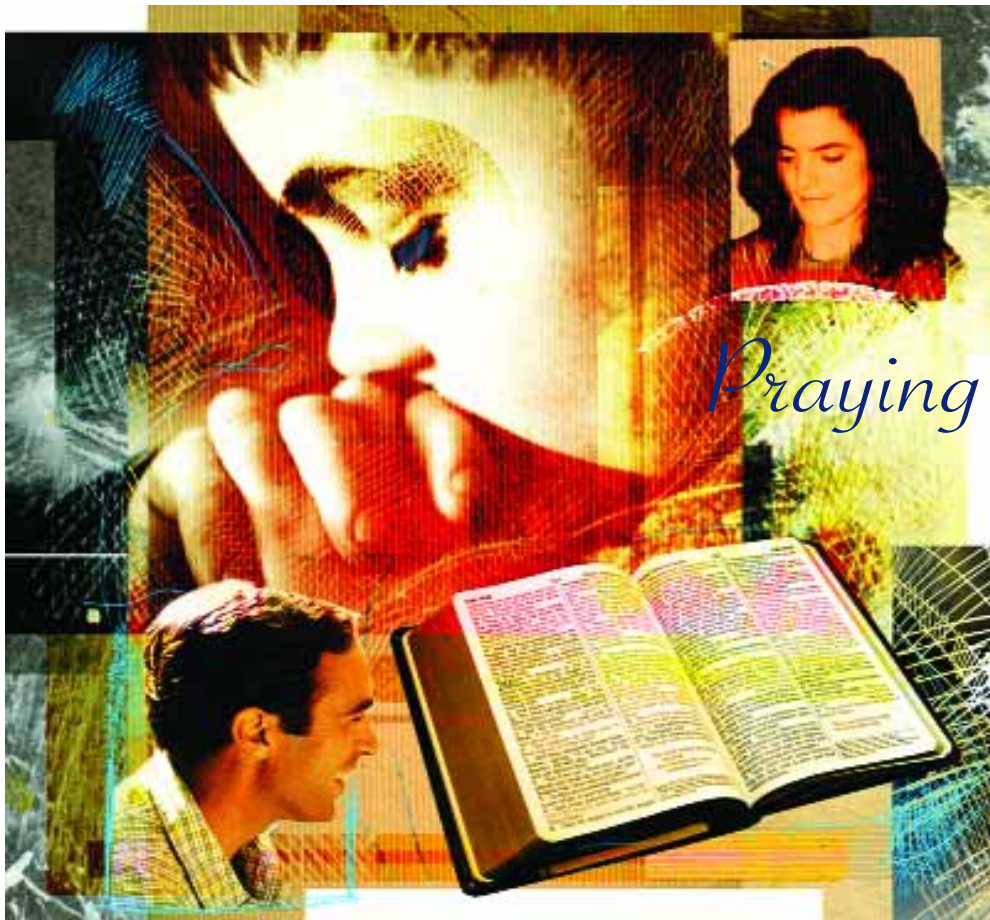
While almsgiving certainly stands on its own as an expression of the grace of God in the life of the believer, the Lenten practice of almsgiving is not meant to be considered aside from the other disciplines of prayer and fasting. Still, the focus of each of these Lenten disciplines—or any Lenten practice, or for that matter, any other liturgical or ecclesiastical tradition—is not the practice itself, but the grace of Jesus Christ who “though he was rich yet for your sakes became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:8b).

How might almsgiving, prayer, and fasting be part of our Lenten experience today? In his book *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church*, Dr. Timothy Maschke suggests how the Lenten disciplines might be observed by a congregation:

“Some congregations have introduced midweek suppers for those who attend the midweek evening services. Perhaps one of these meals might emphasize fasting and

Church, Cleveland, Tenn., carries the following pre-Lenten message:

“Lent is a time during which God’s baptized people cleanse their hearts through the discipline of



almsgiving. Either a sparse amount of food may be offered or a menu that features fare from a country in which the congregation supports mission work. A freewill offering could be collected for missions. ... Vespers or Compline [night prayer] provide meaningful Lenten worship services for the gathered guests, particularly if the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is not offered at the midweek service.”

Another way is for congregations simply to call attention to these historic disciplines so that individual members might think about how to express them personally during their own Lenten journeys. The Web site of First Lutheran

Lent, described as repentance, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Lent is a time during which God’s people prepare with joy for the Paschal Feast. Lent is a time during which God renews His people’s zeal in faith and life.”

Regardless of our individual or congregational Lenten practices, the theme of the season is indeed to prepare to celebrate with joy the Paschal Feast of the Lamb.



Rev. Thomas Ries is president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s Foundation.

GOD'S WORD ON SAME-SEX UNIONS

by Elroi Reimnitz

In 2004, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court stated that the state's marriage laws violated the state constitution. The next day, the *Boston Globe* reported that "more than 1,000 gay and lesbian couples streamed into city and town halls across the state ... on the first day of legalized same-sex matrimony." Attempts are being made elsewhere to legalize same-sex "marriage."

Although the Bible does not make any direct reference to same-sex "marriage," it clearly condemns those who engage in homosexual behavior or are in union with a same-sex partner. Moses warned the people of Israel, saying, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable" (Lev. 18:22).

In the Old Testament, God sometimes severely punished people for their wickedness and immorality. Read Gen. 18:20-33 and 19:15-29 and briefly describe what happened to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and why.

In the New Testament, those who engaged in such practices were excluded from God's kingdom unless there was a sincere desire to repent and abstain. According to St. Paul, what is the eternal consequence and the remedy for those who practice the sins of the flesh, including homosexuality and adultery? Read 1 Cor. 6:9-11 and then write your answer below.

Nowhere in the Bible does the Lord make any reference to same-sex unions or homosexual "marriages" as being acceptable and lawful. On the contrary, the Bible teaches that marriage "is the lifelong union of one man and one woman." What does Gen. 2:18-24 tell us about the sanctity of marriage?

What does the Bible say about the duties and responsibilities between a married couple in 1 Cor. 7:1-5?

St. Paul writes about the mutual submission between a husband and wife in Eph. 5:22-33. How would you describe it?

Delegates to the Synod convention in July 2004 affirmed "on the basis of Scripture, marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman." The convention adopted this resolution 1,163 to 22, urging members of the Synod "to give public witness from Scripture against the social acceptance and legal recognition of homosexual 'marriage.'"

The convention said, "For our Synod to be silent, especially in the present context, could be viewed as acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle."

The Bible is very clear: "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is

left" (Heb. 10:26). For many homosexuals, this is an ongoing struggle accompanied by great pain, guilt, and difficulty throughout their lives, just as many heterosexual people struggle with some particular sin or sins throughout their lives. We see this clearly in 2 Sam. 12, where David, struggling with his adultery, confesses his unfaithfulness, saying, "I have sinned against the Lord."

God forgave him. Nathan told him, "The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die" (:23b). The same is true of the words of Jesus spoken to the woman caught in adultery, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again" (John 8:11).

He has the same words for us. We have forgiveness of our own sins as we "flee from sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18). We have God's promise in Christ: "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." (Eph. 1:7)

In His infinite love and mercy, the Lord is always ready to forgive those who have a sincere desire to repent of their sins by changing their lifestyle, including sexual immorality. We can all take comfort in what God promises in Acts 3:19 and 1 John 1:9 to those who repent.



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DEVOTIONS FOR LIFE: PASS THE BREAD, PLEASE

Devotions are like small, spiritual meals the Holy Spirit uses to feed and grow our faith.

by Tim Wesemann

According to our government's newly revised food pyramid (I hadn't even learned to follow the old one yet!), I can eat 7 ounces of grains a day. That means I could eat 7 slices of bread a day. Sounds good to me! But what would I gain—besides weight? I'd fulfill part of my daily needs for some vitamins like thiamine, calcium, niacin, iron, and

riboflavin—but none of my need for some others like Vitamins A and C.

Obviously, bread alone can't meet all my daily nutritional needs.

Someone else said that long ago. Let's consider the nutritional guidelines suggested by the Bread of Life, who looked Satan in the eye and without blinking said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4, quoted from Deut. 8:3).

More important than bread for our physical life is the life-giving bread of God's Word. Without food we'll die; without the Holy Spirit's faith-creating, faith-sustaining nourishment in the goodness and grace of Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life, we'll die for *eternity*.

This really isn't a small matter, is it?

God desires our hungry faith to be fed for life—real life in Christ!—and to continue to grow. A few of the many ways through which the Lord provides for the needs of our growing faith are His Word, His Sacraments, and His conversations with us. As He leads us through each day, He desires that we not only recognize His presence but also read His Word and carry on faith-growing conversations with Him so we learn all He has to teach us.

*Devotional time
should be a joy,
not a job.*

Sure, that takes time, energy, and sometimes, even money, but it's more than worth the effort. The Holy Spirit wants, through those blessings, to change our lives. He wants to grow and sustain our faith daily. That is His spiritual gift to us—sustaining us with spiritual food as we go from faith meal to faith meal.



The Spirit calls us to heaven's table, as it were, through what we call "devotions." Many Christians—children and adults alike—may be confused by that term. Simply put, devotions come from our devotion to shared time with God. He speaks to us through His Word. We, in turn, converse with the Master of Communications through prayer and perhaps song. And through it all, the Holy Spirit works to nourish and sustain our faith.

Many of us find it difficult to sustain daily devotions. We've started and then given up in frustration. The reasons are numerous. Since we have a bread theme going, let's take a bite out of that idea in considering devotions for life.

Preparation

Just as we make a list before we buy groceries to feed our bodies, let's make a list of important considerations in preparation for family devotions: What age group should my devotions target? Since my family includes both young and old, how can I address the various levels of comprehension? Where should I look for materials? Who can I ask for help in this faith-endeavor? Am I willing to put my resources of time, energy, and small cash into regular devotions?

Crusty Bread

Too many people use the excuse that devotional material, and even the Bible itself, are hard to get into—like crusty French breads. Since we're each at a different place in our faith walk, we'll search out devotional material that we all understand and that addresses our faith at our level. (But we won't be content to remain at that level; we'll keep growing). Devotional bread doesn't have to be dry and crusty. It comes in many varieties. I wrote the devotions in my two books (*Dr. Devo's Lickety-Split Devotions* and *Dr. Devo's New-Fangled Lickety-Split Devotions*) with the goal that they be fun, fast, and fresh without compromising the truth of God's Word. Devotional time should be a joy, not a job. Those of us who find it difficult to take hold of Scripture, may find these suggestions helpful:

- Pray for insights as we read, for past negative ideas about God's Word to be removed from our minds, and for the Holy Spirit to work powerfully as we read and study.



Devotions come from our devotion to shared time with God. He speaks to us through His Word. We, in turn, converse with [Him] through prayer and perhaps song.

- Use a translation we understand. If your family finds the one you're using difficult, seek wise help in choosing another.

Don't feel you have to read large passages at one time. God can prepare a feast for us through one verse or even one word.

Loaf of bread

It's easy to justify not setting apart time for God. It's also wrong. "Our plates are already too full!" we moan. We can loaf around now and do it later. But what a bless-

The car serves as a great devotional vehicle.

ing we'll miss! If we desire to start regular devotions, it's a great idea to set apart a specific, daily time. However, we can do so without being legalistic about it. Let's set a firm time and place to have devotions and try to meet that commitment to God. But let's also remember that unexpected things will come up. Situations and commitments may change. If we are too legalistic in our approach, we either won't enjoy the blessings of the time or may give up in frustration because it didn't work out perfectly.

Remember God's gift of grace! He understands when changes in our lives require a change in time or format of our devotions!

Wonder bread

It's so hard to stand in wonder at things, isn't it? We're rarely wowed because we seem to have seen it all. But God's Word and His world are *AWE*-full! We don't always need a formal devotion book. Look at what's around us!

The car serves as a great devotional vehicle. Everyone is buckled in, and they can't leave. We have family time together! We can ask each other faith or Bible questions and learn so many insights from each other. It's simple. Ask, "If you could ask the apostle Paul (or any biblical person) a question, what would you ask?" Discuss Sunday's sermon or Sunday-School lesson. Or ask, "If you were one of Jesus' 12 disciples, what would your day be like?" Or consider the setting or situation surrounding a favorite Bible passage.

As parents, we can tell our children about the faith struggles and joys we experienced as we grew up.



Maybe sharing our experiences will help them in their faith journey.

We can use daily situations as teachable moments—as devotions God has placed around us. We'll stand in wonder and awe at how He chooses to feed us daily!

Rye bread

Rye bread has those little seeds in it. That's a good reminder that as we search for devotional helps and materials we make sure they contain sound, biblical teaching. It's easy to find little pieces of false teachings scattered in with the good. Some materials will twist and distort God's teachings. Sharing concerns or questions with a pastor or another spiritual leader will help alleviate them. Remember God's inspired words expressed through John, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

Pita Bread

This is just a reminder that when reading the Bible, we won't forget the two books toward the end of the New Testament—1st and 2nd Pita. Oh wait, never mind, that's 1st and 2nd *Peter*!

Raisin' Bread

As we spend time in prayer and devotion with our Savior, He will serve us life-giving and life-saving

truths we can find no where else. His messages will raise us up to new heights as He transforms us into new creations. Let Him work! Rejoice in how He teaches and builds up your faith in Jesus Christ. Whether a family of one or 21, we are all part of the family, or body, of Christ. He wants to build up His body. That can happen through individual or family devotions.

Life is served

Are you starving to know Jesus Christ more intimately? Are you starving to drink from His living water and to receive perfect nutrition from the Bread of Life? Are you starving to sit at a table with Him? Are you starving for life?

Jesus loves to serve and feed us. *The Message*, a book compiled by Eugene Peterson, shares Ps. 119: 103–104 this way: "Your words are so choice, so tasty; I prefer them to the best home cooking. With your instruction, I understand life."

Life is served by the Servant of all servants, Jesus Christ.

By the way, before we start (or continue) our family devotion, let's ask Him to first say grace.



Rev. Tim Wesemann is a writer and author of *Dr. Devo's Lickety-Split Devotions*, and *Seasons under the Son: Stories of Grace*.



LOVING THE ABUSED

Your congregation can help victims and perpetrators of abuse by reaching out to those in your community with Christian love and trust.

by Diane Stelling

“My mother and father were separated. One evening, he came to the front door begging to be let in. My brothers and sisters and I tried to convince my mother not to open the door, but she did anyway. My father shot my mother dead in front of us. I never understood why she opened that door. I could never forgive her for that.”

“Beginning when he was 12, our son was molested by my husband. I knew about it but stood by and did nothing. I have a hard time living with the guilt and don’t think I can ever forgive myself.”

Are these tragic stories unusual? Unfortunately, no. Many stories just like these are shared by audience members at every seminar and workshop I present about domestic violence and child abuse. Abuse is an epidemic in our society, one that slowly kills its victims physically and spiritually. It is a topic that no one speaks about in polite company because it makes people very uncomfortable. And yet, it is an issue that affects people in all socioeconomic and educational levels—and in nearly every congregation. It’s difficult to believe that these things happen to “good” Christians, but they do.

When you sit in church on Sunday, look around. Nearly one third of the adult women sitting in the pews have been physically

assaulted by their partners. Statistics vary, but the Faith Trust Institute estimates that one in three girls and one in seven boys will be sexually molested by the time they are 18.

Abuse comes in many forms, including physical, emotional, sexual, psychological, spiritual, as well as neglect.

Risky and self-destructive behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, eating disorders, and self-mutilation often have abuse as an underlying cause. But abuse victims rarely admit they are being abused. They are filled with shame and guilt because they feel responsible for their abuse. They fear not only retribution if they tell someone, but also that they will be judged and rejected by others—even by God.

I know this because I am a survivor of childhood physical and verbal abuse and adult sexual abuse. I struggled for years with my faith, never feeling comfortable in church, always wondering what people would think if they knew my past.

Facing spiritual issues

There are many books about recovering from abuse and its effects and how to heal *emotionally* and *physically*. However, the *spiritual* effects of abuse have not been well understood or documented. When their church is silent about abuse, victims can feel that church is not a safe place to reveal this problem.

It is most important for victims to be accepted in a nonjudgmental atmosphere, one in which they can learn to trust people.

Abuse victims grapple with difficult spiritual issues. How do they make themselves right with God? Where can abuse victims find themselves in Scripture? What do forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation mean for an abuse survivor? How are victims absolved of the guilt and shame they feel before God? They struggle with the concept of forgiveness in two ways: Will God forgive them, and how do they forgive their abuser?

In order to heal, recover, and feel complete and at peace, victims need answers to these questions. It is most important for victims to be accepted in a nonjudgmental atmosphere, one in which they can learn to trust people.

For years, well-meaning Christians told me not to worry, that Jesus had wiped away my sins. As an abuse victim, whenever I heard that, I bristled. My thoughts always returned to my abuse and the assumption that these were sins for which I needed to be forgiven, for which I had some culpability.

Victims need to know that God views them as innocent regarding the abuse perpetrated against them, that the abuse is not their fault.

The abuser is the sinner; the victim, though outwardly defiled, is untainted in the eyes of the Lord concerning the abuse. However, if, as a result of the abuse, victims adopt destructive and sinful behaviors, they must take responsibility for those actions and seek God's forgiveness and the strength to change.

For victims of child abuse, Christ's words in Matt. 18:5–6,10 offer clear counsel—God watches over victims and does not tolerate abuse or abusers: “And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for

him to have a large millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

Should the victim forgive the abuser? Forgiveness is a process. So are repentance and reconciliation. It may take years for these to occur, if at all. Victims know they are supposed to forgive, but sometimes the acts are so traumatic they cannot bring themselves to that point. They need time and space and a supportive spiritual environment in order to heal.

Repentance on the part of the abuser may or may not occur. And in many instances it is quite dangerous for any reconciliation to occur without true repentance and a change in behavior by the abuser.

Congregations' role

God tells us through the apostle Paul: “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible” Eph. 5:11–14.

Congregations can help people who are suffering from current or past abusive situations. Here are several steps that you can follow to create an action plan:

- 1. Become educated.** We need to understand abuse and how to approach and help victims and perpetrators. Congregations can host seminars and workshops on the topic and invite Christian professional speakers to teach the congregation and clergy appropriate techniques and Scripture passages to employ when dealing with abuse situations.
- 2. Speak about it.** When pastors preach about abuse from the pulpit and offer intercessory prayers for victims and perpetrators, they demonstrate powerful and non-threatening ways to inform the congregation about abuse. Through these efforts both victims and perpetrators learn that the church understands the issue, does not condone abuse, and offers a safe place for those involved in abusive situations to reveal their problems and receive help.
- 3. Support and refer.** Abuse situations are very complex, often requiring in-depth professional psychological counseling as well as secular legal advice. Pastors and congregational members should not try to solve these problems. They can be a first contact, however, offering support to victims in a nonjudgmental manner, and referring them and perpetrators to the appropriate agencies to receive help and guidance.

The church can and should remain as a source of support for the spiritual concerns of those involved in abuse situations.

4. Integrate into programs.

All forms of abuse show a total disregard for the sanctity of the human body and spirit. Messages can be integrated into Sunday-School curricula, youth-group discussions, and Bible-study sessions focusing on respect for our own bodies, feelings, and spirits, as well as those of others, and the potential for evil when we fail to do this.

5. Host special events.

Congregations can devote special services to focus on the topic of abuse. April is Child Abuse Awareness Month, and October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Your congregation might provide support for the local battered woman's shelter, including the donation of books dealing with the spiritual concerns of abuse victims.

6. Host an abuse survivors' support group.

This can create an atmosphere of trust, enabling your congregation to make a difference in the lives of abuse victims in its community. Unfortunately, there are many who have turned away from God, their faith, and their church because they felt abandoned, rejected, and unloved.

As we focus on evangelism and bringing souls to Christ, let's extend a loving, nonjudgmental hand to victims and perpetrators in order to help them down the road toward healing and a closer relationship to Christ.



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The Lutheran doctrine of vocation is a treasure that helps us understand how God does everyday things through us for the world He loves

A GIFT FOR TROUBLED TIMES

by Uwe Simon-Netto

The second stanza of the rarely sung hymn “O God, Thou Faithful God” contains the Lutheran antidote to one of the worst poisons of our troubled time—the “Me” mentality:

**Grant Thou me strength to do
With ready heart and willing
Whate'er Thou shalt command,
My calling here fulfilling;
To do it when I ought
With all my might, and bless
The work I thus have wrought,
For Thou must give success.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 395/Lutheran Worship 371

This wonderful prayer by Johann Heermann, written in 1630 at the height of the catastrophic Thirty Year War in Germany, sums up a nearly forgotten Lutheran treasure—the doctrine of vocation, which says that it is God who assigns us our place of work. And if we fulfill our duties “to the best of our abilities and with utmost diligence,” said Luther, then we are rendering the highest service to God. In post-modern times, this sounds positively countercultural. It focuses neither on self nor the collective “we.” Instead, Luther’s doctrine of vocation directs our activities to the “other,” and thus, by extension, to God.

We often sigh under the burden of this divine assignment, which includes the vocations of husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, students as well as teachers, and grandparents, too.

Full of self-importance, we constantly claim to have “no time” because we are so busy accumulating riches. We become idolatrous workaholics. Our marriages break up under the weight of presumed professional obligations—to the extent that America’s divorce rate (50 percent) is among the highest in the Western world. Children become latchkey kids.

All this is, of course, not what Luther meant when he admonished Christians to “work with a light and merry heart.” Luther was not thinking of the busybody, who has primarily himself in mind and not “the other,” for whose benefit we are burdened with labor.

Burdened? Well yes, with the expulsion from paradise, work has become a burden:

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat



According to Luther, every Christian is called to particular vocations and tasks, through which God works to govern the world and care for His people in the world.

of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field” (Gen. 3:17–18).

It’s not all toil. God left men with signs of His goodness: the music (Gen. 4:21), for example, and the wine that “gladdens man’s heart” (Ps. 104:15), and marital bliss: “Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love. ... For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun” (Eccl. 9:9).

It is one of the most tragic detours in the trajectory of contemporary society that Luther’s perfectly comprehensible insights on vocation have been superseded by greed, vanity, and pomposity. Take my own vocation, journalism. It is easy to see what our calling is. We are to report fairly and comprehensibly about the world around us, and to analyze local, national, and international events responsibly, so as to enable our readers and viewers to make the right choices based on this information.

Instead, major media journalists have made themselves the object of public interest. They become stars, earning fortunes as they opine copiously at lectures. Media managers presume to decide what should or should not be of general interest; hence they tend to neglect the rest of the world in which, they claim haughtily, Americans have little interest—a contemptibly arrogant attitude considering that this country faces not just a globalized economy but also globalized mortal perils.

They also often dismiss religion as a topic to write about competently. In fact, they are taught already at some journalism schools not to report about faith matters at all. Two years ago, honors students from the College of Communications of a major Midwestern university visited me in France and interviewed me about the dramatic new religious developments in that country once called the “first daughter of the

Church,” then became the most secularized nation in Western Europe, and as a result, has run into serious trouble. In a total misconception of his own calling, their professor categorically forbade them to write papers about this. He was misguided, of course, because even total dimwits have come to realize that religion dominates world affairs more than anything else.

Or take lawyers fighting at \$700-per-hour fees for a “woman’s right to choose,” meaning for her “right” to have her child sucked out of her womb or mangled to death inside it. Recently, I received a wrenching letter from an attorney lamenting the fact that the legal profession has almost totally discarded natural law, which, according to St. Paul, is written upon every human being’s heart (Rom. 2:15). The U.S. Supreme Court’s 1973 ruling in *Roe v. Wade* offers a case in point. It runs counter to the conscience that humans of all cultures shared until now. “What’s *just* in the sense of natural law doesn’t matter anymore,” sighed a friend of mine who is a lawyer. “What matters is that it’s *legal*, period.”

Luther had a rather high regard for the vocation of the legal profession. “Pray, be faithful and diligent in your office, help to bring cases to a swift end rather than prolonging them, as so often happens,” he admonished jurists. Ah, if only Luther were here to comment on the habit of dragging out cases unnecessarily until they have accumulated honoraria.

I could mention those in many other vocations who are missing the boat on God’s intention for how they see their work. There are the scientists inanely parroting the cliché that even the suggestion of a possible intelligent design at the origin of the universe is simply “bad science” or, worse still, “shoddy science.” There are the CEOs of

major corporations whose self-centered shenanigans leave employees without pension plans and health coverage. There are politicians who, knowing that the world is running out of oil, neglect to do what’s urgently needed—improve the public transportation system speedily to prevent this nation from falling into chaos when it runs out of gasoline.

There are public servants like an immigration officer I observed at New York’s Kennedy Airport. She just grabbed her handbag and walked off the job without a word of explanation to the scores of new immigrants waiting with valid visas to be allowed into this country. Thankfully, they reacted in the only sensible way; they laughed. But she, the public servant without a sense of vocation, exposed herself, her service, and her country to ridicule.

Where are the Lutherans in all this? Are they heeding the Reformer’s admonition that Christians must engage this world? Do they really toil among the thorns and thistles of public life out of love for their neighbors? Where in the top positions of the major media do we find famous Lutherans? How come, with more than eight million Lutherans in the United States, there are only 20 in the U.S. Congress—and only three LCMS members?

When, in other words, will Lutherans open their doctrinal treasure chest and help themselves first to one of its most wonderful jewels—Luther’s counsel to fully to take charge of the left-hand kingdom, the temporal world in which we live out our biological lives?



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ST. PATRICK ... ABLAZE!

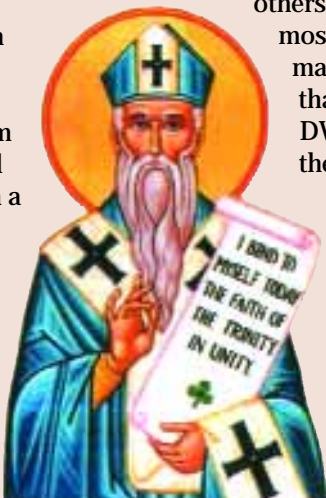
St. Patrick's Day, March 17, is not one of the major festivals of the church year—or even a minor one, for that matter. We've come to think of this day more in terms of parades, green beer, and Irish nationalism.

Patrick himself deserves to be remembered, though, especially for his passion for spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There's a lot of myth mixed in with the facts of Patrick's life, and sometimes it's hard to separate the two. What is not debated is that he became a man on a mission for our Lord and Savior.

St. Patrick was ablaze with the God-given desire to bring the Gospel of life and salvation to those who had not heard this Good News.

Born in Roman Britain in the late fourth century, Patrick was kidnapped as a teenager by Irish pirates and sold into slavery. While he freely admitted later that he wasn't particularly religious as a youth, he did come from a Christian family. Faced with the hardship of slavery, he turned to the Lord in prayer.

After six years, Patrick escaped from Ireland and returned home. God gave him a burning desire to return to Ireland, however, to take the light of Jesus Christ to his former captors. He spent years studying God's Word, became a priest,



and, at last, did go back.

It was not an easy ministry. Patrick was opposed by the pagan Druid priests who had the allegiance of Ireland's people and princes. Many attempts were made on his life. But the evil that opposed Patrick was no match for the working of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel that Patrick proclaimed. By the time of his death 20 years later, Ireland had become overwhelmingly Christian.

You might say Patrick was *Ablaze!* for the Gospel. He exemplified the words of St. Paul: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Rom. 1:16).

This same power is ours—and ours to proclaim—still today. This is what the *Ablaze!* movement is all about.

I'm sure you've heard of *Ablaze!* and the goal of reaching 100 million unreached or uncommitted people worldwide with the Gospel by 2017. Much has been written about it in *The Lutheran Witness* and elsewhere.

Information about *Ablaze!* also has been sent to your pastor and to others in your congregation—most recently in a packet of materials mailed in December that includes a wonderful DVD titled "*Ablaze!* Crossing the Jordan." Have you seen this DVD? If not, you can ask your church-office administrator or your pastor when it will be shown or how it will be used in your congregation.

There are many more *Ablaze!* resources out there for your use and



to help your congregation in a faithful way take the Gospel to unreached and uncommitted people where you live—people for whom Christ also died.

Thanks to support from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, for example, The Center for U.S. Missions in Irvine, Calif., directed the preparation of some very helpful materials under the title "*Friendship Ablaze!*" These may be downloaded free of charge from the Web. Go to www.lcms.org/ablaze and look for *Friendship Ablaze!* at the bottom of the page.

There are links to other *Ablaze!* resources, including more information about the *Ablaze!* DVD, on that Web page as well.

St. Patrick was ablaze with the God-given desire to bring the Gospel of life and salvation to those who had not heard this Good News. May God grant us that same desire—and many opportunities—to share with others our Christian faith and the sure hope of eternal life that is ours in Jesus Christ.

Jerry Kieschnick

Lives Transformed through Christ, in Time ... for Eternity!
John 3:16-17

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