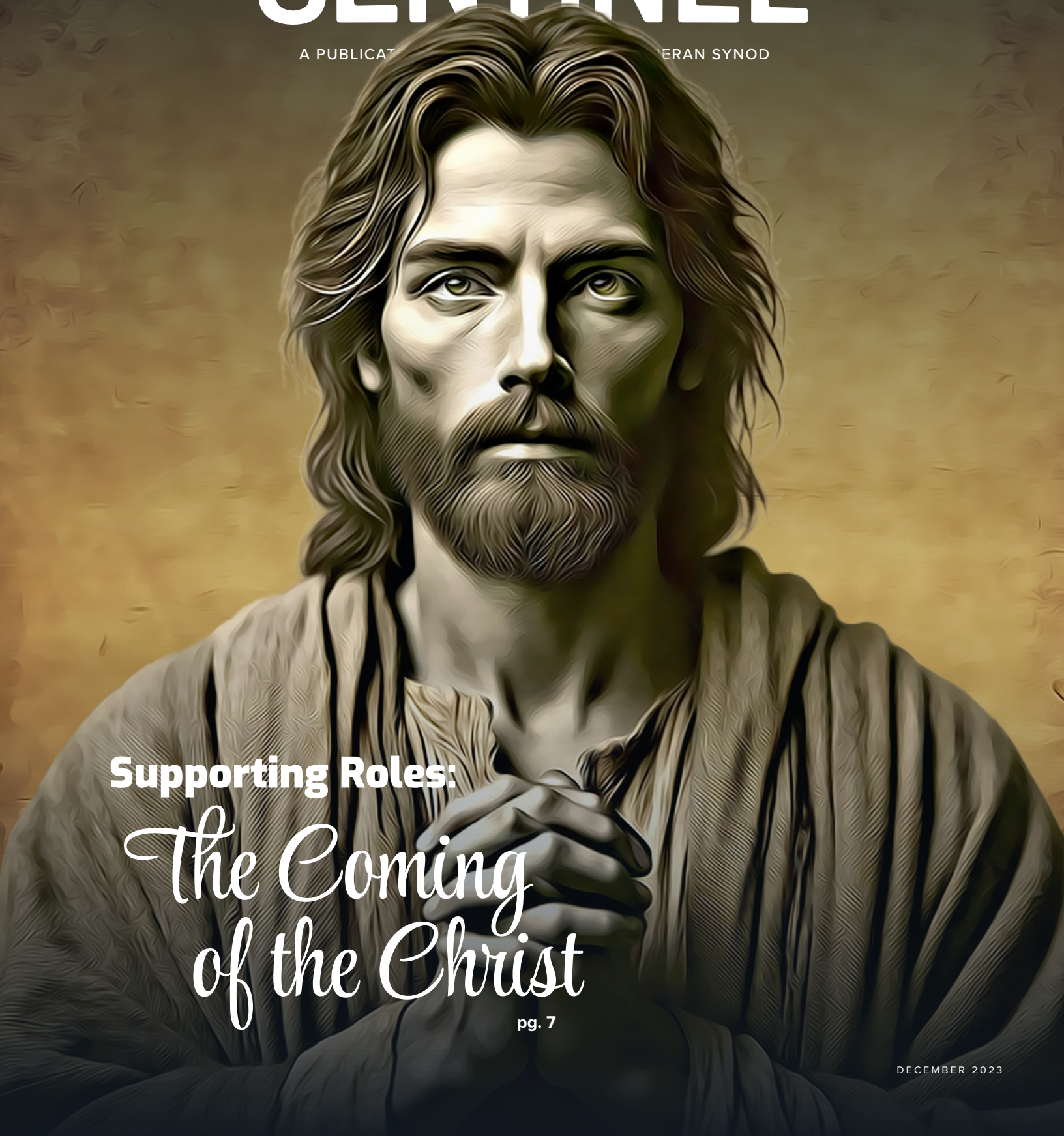




LUTHERAN SENTINEL

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Supporting Roles:

*The Coming
of the Christ*

pg. 7



Our Common Cause for Rejoicing

As we enter a season full of holidays—starting with Thanksgiving through the Christmas season—we should take note of how they are bundled together. How they are tied with the string of our sinfulness and our need for a merciful God

We confess with Luther in the First Article our faith in God our Father and that “He richly and daily provides me with food and clothing, home and family, property and goods, and all that I need to support this body and life.”

Often in our affluence, the common sin of ingratitude can be named among us through our many “First World” complaints. We complain when the supermarket does not have the items we seek to make our gourmet meal, when we take special note of fuel prices rising for our second vehicle, when we are inconvenienced in most any way. Meanwhile, we have our fellow human beings in Third World countries that are starving to the point of malnutrition, who have no clean water to drink, and yet who are grateful even for a bicycle to use for transportation.

With all such complaints, we are in essence criticizing God our Provider, whom we think makes our lives difficult through what we perceive to be stinginess. We are tempted to commit idolatry, making ourselves into the superior god who knows better how to satisfy our every need of body and life. With every act of disobedience we commit, we join Eve in her quest to become like God.

Remember what Satan told Eve: “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...” “So when the woman saw that the tree ...was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.” They were disappointed in all the

other food richly provided in the garden and ate that one fruit God forbade.

Our first parents, having been made in God’s image, wanted to become more like God, but this desire brought only disaster. Yet God loved them and us so much He Himself became flesh—like us. The Seed of the woman would come and crush Satan’s head, defeating our sin, death, and hell for us.

This was God’s plan from eternity. He in the second person would take on human flesh. He would be born naked and have our shame covered by swaddling clothes. He would have that perfect body and soul deprived of food at times, and going to the cross, He would once again be stripped bare, to endure a great and eternal thirst, to suffer and die in taking upon Himself our everlasting guilt and shame. Oh, my fellow sinners, we in our sin still shamefully long to become like God, but God has overcome our foolish desire by becoming us and by setting us free from all our shamefulness forever.

May you find no room in your Thanksgiving celebration for our typical “First World” complaints but instead rejoice in finding how richly your gracious Lord provides for your every need of body and life. Then, as you continue in the holiday season, may you recognize what your gracious Lord has done for you by becoming true man.

You need not try to become God for yourself. That holy body and blood born of the Virgin made full payment for all your sins, even your selfish ingratitude. Whether we are Christians in the “First” or “Third World,” we have the same reasons to rejoice equally in songs and prayers of praise and thanksgiving. A blessed holiday season to you and your dear ones for Jesus’ sake.

LUTHERAN SENTINEL

BACKGROUND: A pastoral-view of the sanctuary at **King of Grace**, Golden Valley, Minn. Photo courtesy, **Dan Browning**.

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EVEN UNTO DEATH:

The Story of the First Lutheran Martyrs

by **REV. ADAM S. BRASICH**, Contributing Writer
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When I was confirmed as a young adult, there was one vow that particularly struck me. My pastor asked me whether I promised to suffer anything—“even death”—rather than fall away from the Lutheran faith. Like many of you, I answered, “I do, and I ask God to help me.” That confirmation vow highlights the importance and gravity of our confession. Lutheranism is not one denomination amongst many others. It is not one more brand in the religious marketplace. It’s life. It proclaims the Gospel message that Jesus Christ lived and died to save us from our sins! It dispenses God’s grace through holy sacraments which give us eternal life. Therefore, we should be willing to suffer anything—“even death”—rather than renege on our faith. That’s what the story of the first Lutheran martyrs, **Jan van Essen** and **Hendrick Vos**, reminds us.

Jan and Hendrick were Augustinian monks in the Dutch city of Antwerp. The leader of their religious house, Jacob Probst, had heard Luther preach, and he was convinced of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. Therefore, he preached it to his fellow Augustinian monks in Antwerp, many of whom accepted it. Jan and Hendrick were among those who converted to Lutheranism.

However, preaching and acceptance of the Gospel attracted opposition. Papal and government officials condemned Luther’s teachings as heresy, and they sought to suppress it. In 1522, the Inquisition began to root out “heretics,” and they found many among the Augustinians in Antwerp. Upon interrogation and threats of punishment, many of them recanted—including Probst (who soon moved to another city and resumed preaching the Gospel of justification by faith alone).

During the winter of 1522-1523, several of the Augustinian brothers were imprisoned due to their Lutheran confession. They were kept in miserable conditions, and soon they realized that they might be burned at the stake as heretics. One by one, most of the imprisoned friars recanted their faith. However, Jan and Hendrick remained faithful.

Because of their obstinacy, the Inquisition interrogated Jan and Hendrick one last time. Still they refused to recant their faith. Hendrick proclaimed, “I do not care for my life. My soul I commend to God.” Both Jan and Hendrick were enraptured with Christ, with His blood shed for them for the remission of their sins, that they could not fathom rejecting Him. Rejecting the Gospel of justification by faith alone was tantamount to

rejecting Christ. This was impossible, even when the Inquisition scheduled a date for their execution. Given another opportunity to recant, they refused. Therefore, their fate was sealed.

Condemned as heretics, Jan van Essen and Hendrick Vos would burn at the stake on July 1, 1523. Before they were tied to the stake, they were ritually defrocked, or removed from the Roman Catholic clergy. As they were led to the stake, priests continually sought a last-minute recantation. However, none was forthcoming. Instead, Jan and Hendrick replied by confessing their Lutheran faith.

Tied to the stake, Jan and Hendrick awaited death. They waited longer than they probably expected. It took about thirty minutes for the kindling to be lit. Perhaps the Roman Catholic clergy were giving them yet a little more time to recant their faith. If so, they were disappointed. They patiently awaited their martyrs' reward.

Once the death-bringing fire was lit and sustained, the clerics gave Jan and Hendrick one final opportunity to reject Lutheranism. One last time, Jan and Hendrick refused. Instead, they confessed their faith. They sang the liturgical songs they knew so well. They chanted the Creed. They prayed the canticle, "We praise You, O Lord!" As the smoke blinded their eyes, they echoed the cry of blind Bartimaeus (and every sinner in need of Christ's grace), "Lord Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us!" St. Paul encouraged the Christians "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1). Jan and Hendrick fulfilled these words as they became the first Lutheran martyrs.

News quickly spread throughout western Europe concerning the executions of Jan van Essen and Hendrick Vos. When Luther heard what had happened, perhaps naturally, tears streamed down his face. One might expect tears of grief at the gruesome execution or maybe even tears of anxiety at the fate that might await him. However, by all accounts, they were tears of thanksgiving. Luther was grateful to Jan and Hendrick's resolute confession of faith—even unto death. Luther said, "I thought I would be the first to be martyred for the sake of this holy gospel; but I am not worthy of it."

Luther praised God for the Gospel's power. This might seem odd to those of us who associate power with large numbers and political prowess. However, Luther understood the theology of the cross. He knew that Christ was strongest when He appeared weakest. The moment of His greatest strength and power was on the cross, when He died in order to conquer sin on our behalf. God also uses humble elements, such as bread and wine, to give us salvation.

In a similar way, the smoke which rose in the Netherlands demonstrated the power of the Gospel. God's Word converted the souls of Jan van Essen and Hendrick Vos, and

nothing could separate them from the love of Christ. Knowing Jesus and what He had done for them, death had lost its sting. They were so intertwined with Christ that they could no more deny Him than deny themselves. Their martyrdoms revealed the Gospel's strength and reality.

Luther responded with knowing tears, and he responded with song. Putting pen to paper, the Reformer composed the first of many hymns he would write over the coming decades.

*Flung to the heedless winds
Or on the waters cast,
The martyrs' ashes, watched,
Shall gathered be at last.
And from that scattered dust,
Around us and abroad,
Shall spring a plenteous seed
Of witnesses for God.*

*The Father hath received
Their latest living breath,
And vain is Satan's boast
Of vict'ry in their death.
Still, still, though dead, they speak,
And, trumpet-tongued, proclaim
To many a wak'ning land
The one availing name.*

(ELH 556)

Luther was right. "Though dead, they speak," and they proclaim "the one availing name" of Jesus Christ. When we consider the martyrdoms of Jan van Essen and Hendrick Vos and commemorate its five-hundredth anniversary, we are confronted by the potential cost of being a Christian. Jesus Christ told His disciples to "take up [your] cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Jan and Hendrick took up their crosses, and it led to the stake. Discipleship has a cost. That's what we acknowledge in our confirmation vows when we promise to suffer anything, even death, rather than reject our faith.

However, Christ gives us strength to carry our crosses and follow him. Jan and Hendrick did not remain steadfast because they possessed an incredibly deep well of personal courage. They heard God's Word. The Holy Spirit converted them and gave them an unshaking faith in Christ. They knew that they were sinners saved by grace. Jan and Hendrick trusted in God's love—and so do we. God has blessed us with the same faith which sustained Jan and Hendrick. The same Holy Spirit which dwelt in Jan and Hendrick has made us His temples as well. Therefore, with equal faith and trust in the promises of God, we boldly confess our Lutheran faith—even unto death.

Question ...

If Thanksgiving Day is merely a secular national holiday, why do churches offer worship services on or around that day?

Answer:

Many Americans have what could be called a “love-hate relationship” with Thanksgiving. On the one hand, Thanksgiving is the most popular holiday in the United States. According to Statista.com, as of this summer, Thanksgiving Day beats out both Christmas and Easter for the top spot. In more recent years, however, Thanksgiving has received some negative attention because the day has lost its significance as a call to thank God for His many blessings. Since Thanksgiving Day is a uniquely American tradition and historically not a part of the Christian church’s calendar of festivals, some have wondered why churches still continue to offer special Thanksgiving worship opportunities.

Origins of Thanksgiving

Our modern Thanksgiving Day celebration has its official beginning with a proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln on October 3, 1863—at the height of the Civil War—that called for a national day of thanksgiving on Thursday, November 26, of that year. Unofficially, though, Thanksgiving’s history runs much farther back than 1863. Our modern Thanksgiving Day tradition really goes back to the first Puritan settlers who landed on this continent in the early 1600s. After surviving their first deadly winter and enjoying a rich and bountiful harvest, the settlers celebrated a feast of thanksgiving to God for bringing them through tough times and providing for their needs. That week, about 90 members of the Wampanoag people also made a visit to the settlement, contributing their own gifts to the festival.

This kind of “thanksgiving” was not unique for the Puritans. The colonists regularly celebrated days of prayer and thanking God for blessings such as victories in battle or the end of a drought. This was no secular holiday. It was a day for Christians to worship and praise God for His many gifts. So while the current Thanksgiving Day may be declared by our secular government, it still serves a divine purpose.

1. Mussmann, Anna. “In Defense of Giving Thanks.” *The Lutheran Witness*, Nov. 23, 2022.

The Need for Thanksgiving

And that purpose is sorely needed. In today’s world, many look down on the whole idea of gratitude to God. Some believe that thanking God for our own blessings denies the reality of suffering and pain in the lives of others. The name “Thanksgiving” itself makes people uncomfortable with the notion that we human beings have a reason to be thankful—and that there is Someone outside of ourselves to whom we need to express our gratitude.

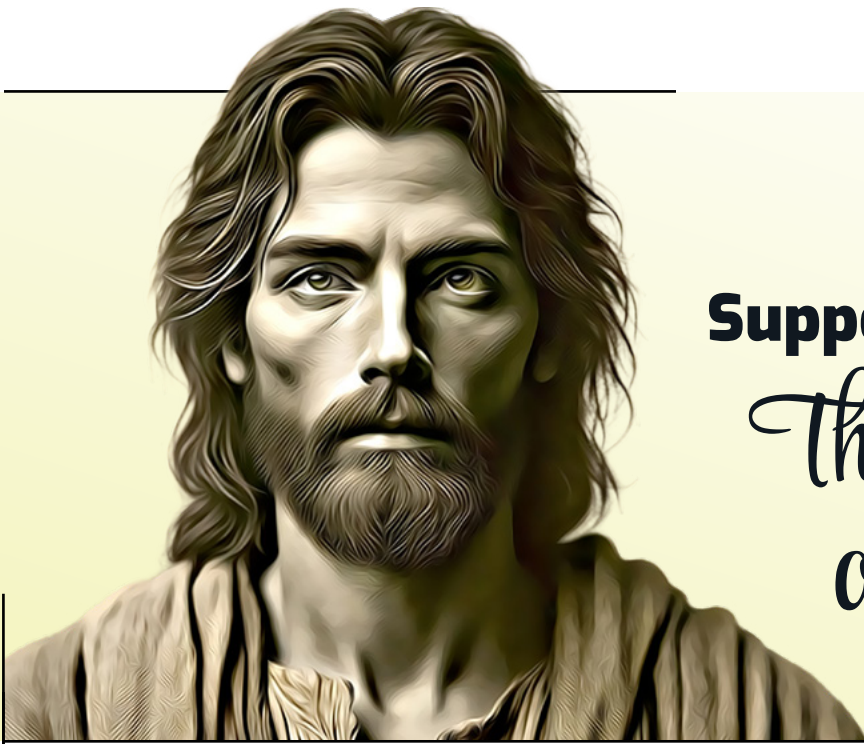
In the current anti-gratitude milieu, the national Day of Thanksgiving provides God’s people with a time to publicly and privately give thanks to the Lord for His countless blessings to us—in our own personal and family lives, in the lives of our congregation and our synod, even in the life of our nation. On Thanksgiving—or in many cases nowadays, the night before—Christians gather around Word and Sacrament to remember how everything we have is a gift of His grace. His mercies “are new every morning” (Lamentations 3:23, EHV).

So even though the day is technically a “national” holiday, the church in Christian freedom capitalizes on the opportunity to see how God graciously provides for our needs and to find encouragement to praise and thank God every day in word and deed. In the end, the church is free to gather around God’s means of grace and to give Him thanks and praise any day it chooses. Why not on or around a day when people are free to gather? Why not on the national Day of Thanksgiving?

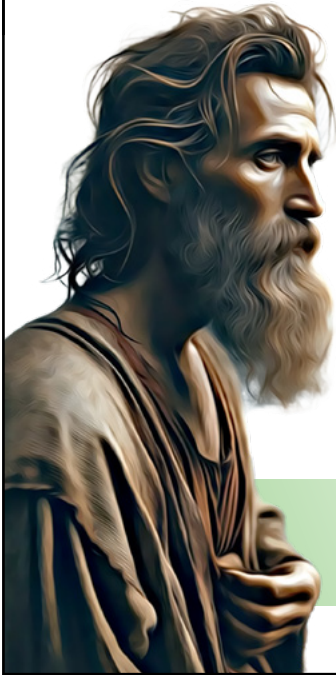


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Supporting Roles: *The Coming of the Christ*



The
FORERUNNER

Supporting Role: a definition - *a character who plays a part in a television show, movie, or stage production or novel... other than those of the lead characters. A supporting actor is usually not part of the primary focus of the plot... taking part in key plot movements or character developments, but the, never upstaging the leads or becoming the primary focus of attention.*

Within the parameters of such a supporting role we may well think of Watson in Sherlock Holmes, or Robin from Batman and Robin, or Ron Weasley in the Harry Potter series.

In the Bible's narrative, there is a single leading character. Jesus Himself takes despairing disciples into the Scriptures and demonstrates how all the Law and the Prophets testify concerning Him (Luke 24:27). Jesus the Christ is the quintessential Leading Role.

But in this Best-seller testimony of God's compassion for sinners in promising and delivering Jesus, the Christ, there are indeed some very noteworthy supporting roles. And the Gospel record leading up to and involving the birth of the Christ are ripe with notable supporting roles in this Coming Christ. The following three articles pay homage to three roles that play pivotal roles in the birth and life of Jesus while never upstaging His saving work.

First, The Forerunner...

The
GOD-BEARER



The
GUARDIAN





The
FORERUNNER:
St. John
The Baptizer

And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

Matthew 11:2-3

Where was John when he sent disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the Coming One or do we look for another?” John was in prison. He had been there for months by now. He needs to let his followers know that he himself is not the One, but that they need to focus on Jesus. John is to decrease as Jesus increases. John’s work is that of the Forerunner, the one who points to someone else. That’s what John’s calling was. It was never about him. He knew that. But many who followed him did not know that. So John, before he was murdered by King Herod, would point to Jesus for the people one last time.

Jesus answered John, not with a simple yes, but by pointing to the very prophecies about the “Coming One,” the Messiah. God’s Word had been pointing ahead for centuries. Isaiah said: look at what will happen—blind, lame, lepers, deaf, and dead will be helped by “the One.” Are there blind people around Jesus? If so, what happened to them? They were enabled to see again. What about the lame? Does Jesus heal cripples? Yes. They now walk. How about lepers and the deaf? Yes, they too are fixed, made clean, new skin, new lives, ears that work again—because of Jesus. Even the dead? Yes, even the dead. They live. A little girl. A young man. Lazarus. Death doesn’t like Jesus. It runs away from Him, leaving Him to simply speak His Word of Life to restore what was taken away by death.

What about the poor? Here we need to understand that the word “poor,” while at times used in Scripture to designate a lack of basic physical necessities for life, is more often about lacking God, about not having salvation, about being in debt to sin and death. These poor have the Gospel, the good news, preached to them. That is what Jesus is doing all over Galilee, all over Judea, and even outside the boundaries of Israel. Jesus is doing good works to help people. Jesus is proclaiming that the kingdom of God has come—He is THE sign above all others. To see Him, to hear Him, is to know: Yes, He is the One.

But after listing all these great things that He Himself does as the Son of God in human flesh, Jesus also says: Do not be offended because of Me. What is offensive about Jesus? Well, we don’t even need to read the Gospels very carefully at all to find out there are plenty of people offended by Jesus. The term in Greek is “scandal,” a tripping up. Why does this happen? Because of Who He is and what He does.

We have to know that there are lots of people who do not like Jesus. King Herod didn’t. He wanted Jesus dead as soon as he found out about “the newborn king of the Jews.” Time after time in the gospels, people are trying to kill Jesus by stoning Him or throwing Him off a cliff. He says He’s God. That doesn’t sit well with people. Who does He think He is? He also points out a lot of sin in people. Nobody likes that. But even more, Jesus has the temerity to die for others.

There’s the real scandal; that’s what trips up more people than anything else.

If all Jesus did was go around and tell people to be nice, maybe people would be less offended. But that wasn’t and isn’t Jesus’ message. His message is: I’m here because you need me. To which human hubris declares, “No, I don’t!” Until I do.

Prison, sin, the imminence of death—these get one thinking about the cold, hard facts of one’s life, a span of time that is filled with guilt and ends with a final gasp and nothing else. To be sure, there are plenty of cool things, too, even beautiful and wonderful experiences of life. But they don’t last. Neither you nor even the greatest prophet, John the Baptizer, can change the fleeting reality of that.

But John was sent to run ahead and prepare the way for One who could change that—One who DID change that. Behold! Jesus—He is the One. Isaiah foretold Him and only Him.

There is no other. Just One, and that One is Jesus Himself, the Son of God, born of Mary.

*“Look! The Lamb of
God who takes away
the sin of the world.”
(John 1:29)*

So what will you do with this answer from Jesus to John’s question? Will it just sort of lie around in your life, get put into some spiritual junk drawer, or will it change you?

John’s life was changed because of Jesus. In fact, without Jesus, John would likely have become a priest like his father Zacharias. But because of Jesus, John’s life was sanctified for a very unique supporting role—to blaze the immediate trail for God’s promised One: “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). That was John’s job. Point to Jesus; show Him to be the Christ; preach repentance; prepare the people.

And John, the relative of Jesus, played his supporting role—even in prison—even in his martyrs’ death. But John wasn’t the leading character. So neither was his death the “leading death.” Jesus, the Christ, increased and with His leading death He undid John’s unceremonious death. And that leading death is overcoming guilt and undoing death to this day even as it remains a stumbling block for the Devil, the world, and fallen human flesh.

John the Baptizer served nobly in his supporting role. He ran before the Promised One to come. He preached repentance, preparing hearts, ears, and eyes to behold the Savior of sinners. And then he decreased as Jesus—the leading Role in redemption—the Way of peace, the Way of life, the Way of God’s forgiveness and mercy increased.

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the Child you will bear!”

by **REV. DON MOLDSTAD**, Contributing Writer,
Chaplain, **BETHANY LUTHERAN COLLEGE**, Mankato, Minn.

With these words, Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin, provides the first recorded response from believers to the wonderful news of the Messiah’s arrival. What an amazing event in history, that the very Son of God would now humble Himself to be born of a virgin in order to work out the plan of our salvation! Is it any wonder why Christmas is such a celebrated festival in the Church year?

Probably every Christian has wondered what it was like for Mary to be chosen by God for this important role. We can only imagine the thoughts running through her mind and how this might change her entire life. Yet, in humble faith, trusting in her heavenly Father’s will, she humbly responds to the angel, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your Word.” Lord, give us such a faith!

The virgin birth of our Savior underscores His divine nature, having been conceived in Mary by the overshadowing presence of the Holy Spirit. The significance of this truth cannot be overstated in the Christian faith. “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman.” When God’s timing was right, Mary was selected out of all the women to bear the Christ-child. She was in need of a Savior along with everyone else. She was not of any nobility. She was one of the humble believers waiting for the consolation of Israel.

Prof. Mark Harstad commented that her beautiful wording in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) indicates someone who was very well-versed in the Old Testament psalms... the very psalms that pointed ahead to the Child she would bring into the world. Like many Hebrew women of her day, she had probably memorized the twenty-third Psalm. How often had she heard the words of Isaiah read in her synagogue, “*The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son, and they will call Him Immanuel*” (Isaiah 7:14)?

The evangelist Matthew, writing primarily to a Jewish audience, begins his Gospel by identifying the truth of the virgin birth as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s words. Some scholars speculate that he may have felt a need to counter charges of adultery raised by some Jews regarding Mary, and which Jesus possibly had to address during His ministry. The Jewish Talmud, a commentary by rabbis, indicates ancient references to Mary as an “adulteress woman” and her Child as being illegitimate. Writings indicate it was rumored that Jesus was not the biological Son of Joseph. Matthew also includes the account of Joseph originally planning to set aside his engagement since the Child Mary was carrying was clearly not his. All of this highlights the fact that Mary’s Child was not fathered by her fiancé.

To underscore the blessed truth of the virgin birth, the Gospels specifically exclude Joseph as being paternally responsible for Jesus. Jesus omits any mention of having an earthly father since He has none (Matthew 12:48-50). In John 6:42) the Jews refer to Jesus as the “son of Joseph”; however, Jesus does not respond but refers to His Father as the One who draws those who come to Him (John 6:45ff). In the temple scene (Luke 2:41-51), the 12-year-old Jesus speaks of doing His “Father’s business.”

The GOD-BEARER: St. Mary



The miraculous nature of the virgin birth upholds the very nature of Jesus Himself as true God and true Man in one. The devil is a wise theologian. He understands the significance this holds for the Gospel proclamation. He strives to go about destroying truth from inside the earthly church: the Ebionites claimed to be Christian, but denied the virgin birth to such an extent that they removed Matthew chapters one and two from their Bibles. Attacks also came from outside. The second century Roman author, Celsus, attacked the virgin birth, fearful that Christianity would someday bring down the Roman empire. Origen felt a need to respond to his false claims even a century later.

Lutheran theologian Dr. David Scaer rightly points out that the Church always saw a great need to affirm the fact of the virgin birth of Christ in order to uphold the significance, purpose, and meaning it holds for our spiritual lives and our relationship to God. In order to defend and protect this precious truth, the early creeds of the church never referred to Jesus’ mother simply as “Mary,” but rather as “the Virgin Mary.”

The virgin birth is at the center of the very nature of who Christ is. St. Augustine explains: “It was necessary that as Mediator between God and men Christ have something similar to God and something similar to men. Otherwise, if He should be similar to men in every respect He might have been too far removed from God, or if He should be similar to God in every way, He would be too far removed from men.” The God-Man, Jesus Christ, would alone be the only possible “go-between” for our salvation. Because of His important work, “we have peace with God” (Romans 5:1), and we are invited to “approach the throne of grace with confidence” (Hebrews 4:16).

We may wish we knew more about the Virgin Mary beyond the accounts provided in Scripture. What a unique situation she experienced to have her own Son’s blood be the very payment that permitted her to enter heaven. She would be the first to turn any attention away from herself and back onto her Savior-Son. How wonderful it will be to finally meet her among all of the saints in heaven who by faith in Christ were redeemed from all of their sins. May her name be truly blessed among us, as the one great God-bearer.



The GUARDIAN: St. Joseph

“God blessed Joseph and his work. God notices and blesses our work. Our work, our labor, our deeds, so tainted with selfishness, should be ‘naught and worthless’ in the sight of God, but instead they are precious and appreciated because they are the deeds of the children of God.”

by **REV. ALEX RING**, Contributing Writer,
Pastor & Teacher, **CHRIST LUTHERAN SCHOOL**, Port St. Lucie, Fla.

If you use the hymns and carols of Christmas to construct a manger scene, you will find yourself placing Mary and Baby Jesus, and you will have the shepherds coming to see the Babe in swaddling clothes. The wise men will find their way into the scene; even oxen, donkeys, and sheep will be represented. Yet this leaves a gaping hole in this familiar scene: No Joseph. He’s prominent in Luke 2 and has a part in every manger scene and Christmas pageant, but in our songs and carols, he is essentially forgotten, overshadowed even by the animals.

This hardly seems a just arrangement for this just man. Joseph was so important that God sends an angel to him to make sure he takes Mary as his wife, for God decided Jesus needed a human father for His earthly childhood. A human father who would be a loving husband to Mary and a loving parent to this child. A human father who would protect his wife and Child from wicked men like Herod.

You would think all this would be worth at least one line in one Christmas carol, and yet in the end, Joseph receives very little mention or credit. He fills a very important role, but otherwise seems unnoticed, though hopefully not unappreciated, because we know what a hard thing it is to labor in the world and yet be

unappreciated for what you do. To have our spouse and children not recognize what we do for our families. To work at our job only to have no one seem to notice the extra effort that we put in. To try to listen to our parents and teachers, yet only have them notice when we do something wrong. And so we are very often tempted to say to ourselves, “I do all these good things, and yet I’m not appreciated. Well, I’m done. From now on, my wife can fix her own stuff. If my kids leave their things laying around, I’ll just leave them, let them get broken. My boss can find someone else to do extra work. My church can find someone else to help on cleanup day or serve on that committee, because from now on, I don’t do anything for anyone unless I get something out of it or at least get a sincere thank you.”

It is very easy for our gratitude over being appreciated to turn into vanity. For us to list all the wonderful things that we do that make this world a better place, and then shake our heads at the ignorance of those around us who don’t recognize how important we really are. And so we withdraw our kindnesses and our helpful service and piously call it “teaching them a lesson” when really it is nothing but narcissism, conceited self-importance that puts our own needs and desires above those whom God has placed in our lives for us to serve.

We say to ourselves, “It just isn’t worth it,” and we find ourselves and our attitude in stark contrast to the One “though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6–8). What makes the manger and the cross worth it to Jesus is not our appreciation, but the fact that it was the role given Him by God. The Father says, “This is how We will bring salvation to fallen humanity,” and Jesus says, “Thy will be done.” In the end, this is why the Second Person of the Trinity takes to Himself a human body, is born in a manger, suffers, and dies. Forgiving even your sins of self-importance and selfishness. Jesus is motivated and rewarded completely by His love for us and the knowledge that this is the will of God. This is why unlike us, Jesus did not limit His kindness and helpful service to those who appreciated Him, but to all who came to Him.

It does feel at times, often many times, that all we do goes unnoticed and unappreciated, but this is actually not true. Our deeds, our labor never goes unnoticed because there is always One who does notice. God takes notice of our labor. God noticed Joseph. As we said before, God thought Joseph so important He sent an angel to him to ensure that Joseph would stay with Mary and fulfill his part in the plan of salvation, provide all those unnoticed little acts that would make the life of Mary and of the Child Jesus that much better. God blessed Joseph and his work. God notices and blesses our work. Our work, our labor, our deeds, so tainted with selfishness, should be “naught and worthless” in the sight of God, but instead they are precious and appreciated because they are the deeds of the children of God. They are done by those who have faith in Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, even the sins of selfishness and vanity. In Jesus, all our deeds are cleansed and made to be something worth the appreciation of God.

echoes

from **ELS PULPITS**
past

EXCERPTED FROM PRINT: *"Morning Bells at Our Saviour's"*
OCCASION: **Christmas Day**
AUTHOR: **Rev. Norman A. Madson, Sr.**

A Peace Pact Eternal

Luke 2:1-14

EXORDIUM:

The very act of creation, the declaration of His glory in the never-ending marvels of nature, the unerring exactness of the hand which guides the unnumbered heavenly bodies on their destined courses – all pale into insignificance when compared with that wonder of wonders which reveals itself in the lowly manger-bed at Bethlehem. Here God becomes man! And for what purpose? To redeem a fallen race.

Had not God's infinite love found a way, every mortal would forever have remained "the creature that weeps." But divine love did find a way. The story, though hoary with age, is still fresh as the sparkle of the morning dew. Why? Ah, friends, that which satisfies man's most fundamental need will never grow old. You have an immortal soul which must be provided for, dear hearer, and unless the blessed Christ-child be brought into the picture, you will remain an alien from the commonwealth of Israel, a stranger from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. Shall we remain cold and indifferent to its wondrous message? No, we will arise and join our hearts and voices in the singing of our festival stanza: "Rejoice, Rejoice This Happy Morn".

TEXT: Luke 2:1-14

Fellow Redeemed. The heavenly messenger over the plains of Bethlehem announced that which meant more to the troubled shepherds than anything else. What was it? It was a proclamation of peace. At long last, that fullness of the time was come when the promised seed of the woman was to appear on the scene to bruise the head of the serpent.

When Christ was ushered into the world and peace was promised to a world at enmity with God, it was not a carnal, an earthly peace, but spiritual and divine peace. It is the peace concerning which the Savior Himself said shortly before His crucifixion: *"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid"* (John 14:27).

It is true, men have lived and dreamed of a carnal peace, and they will go on dreaming of this peace while the earth remains. Do you believe that such a peace will ever dawn? Then let me tell you at once that you are living in a fool's paradise. That kind of peace has not been promised to you by the Savior. But He has promised you that which will mean more to you than anything else if you have learned to know your lost condition under the condemnation of the law. From that terror of conscience, He has promised you: "A peace pact eternal".

I. What is meant by "a peace pact"? If men would but read their Christmas Gospel with just a bit of reflection, they ought to learn to see the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. If you are living in the hope of some sort of an earthly millennium, you had better read what Christ has to say in the 24th chapter of Matthew about the condition which shall prevail when he comes to judge the living and the dead, or what Paul has recorded in 2 Timothy 3. It is anything but a pleasant picture.

But it is the peace pact eternal which is now our concern. When the angel Gabriel came to Nazareth to announce the coming of the Messiah, what does he tell the virgin mother? *"He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end"* (Luke 1:33). When men begin to speak of any lasting peace outside of Christ, they are not reckoning with a fallen creature. And, what is more, they are not dealing with man's greatest problem. For what is that? Is it the settlement of wars? No, man's greatest problem is that one little but very nasty word called sin.

But as the citizens of Bethlehem had no room for the Savior of the world on the night of His nativity, so even among those who would be known as His disciples today, how few there are who really grasp the full meaning of the words He spoke at the very end of His earthly sojourn: *"My kingdom is not of this world"* (John 18:36).

II. How is this peace pact established? Since it has to do with sin and its removal from the souls of men, we must not become disturbed at the mention of our sins in connection with the Christ-child. For it was to seek and to save that which was

lost that He came. His coming had no other purpose. When Christ came *"He took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham"* (Hebrews 2:16). That is what the name "Immanuel" means – "God with us".

And that is the marvel of the incarnation, that He who was God from all eternity, He by whom the worlds were made, now appears upon earth as an infant in arms. And it didn't only mean this, but it meant infinitely more. For we are told that He was not only made of a woman, but He was made under the law. That yoke which had been hanging around the necks of all mortals, proclaiming them to be sinners under the curse, was now to be placed on Him and borne by Him as man's substitute. The law, which we had most miserably failed to keep, was now to be kept to the letter by Him so that the heavenly Father would not have a single charge against us at His judgment seat. The very name which the angel gives this Child is significant in this regard. *"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord"* (Luke 2:11).

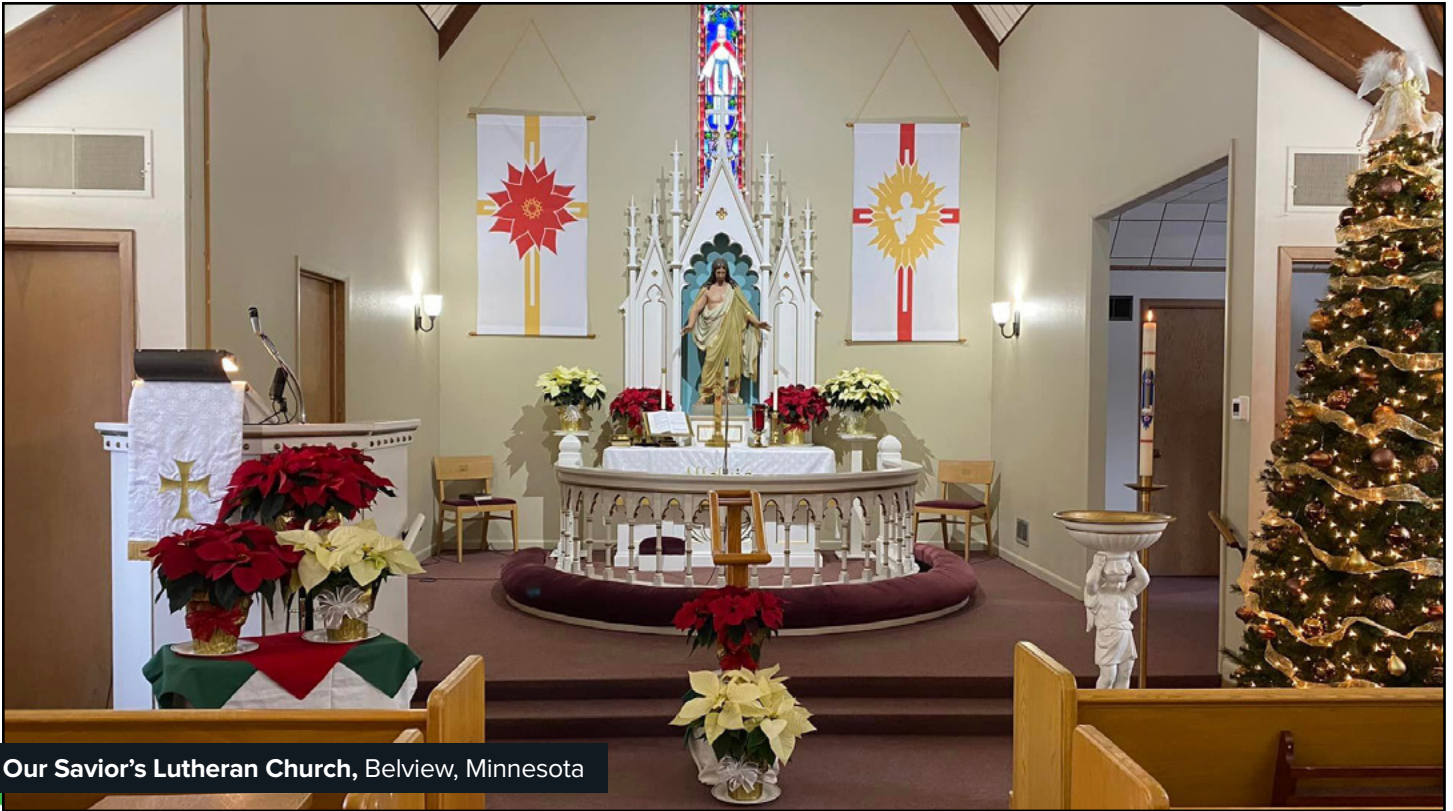
Now that Christ is come, there is not an enemy on earth or in the lowest depths of hell which you need fear. Whenever the hosts of evil assail you, reminding you of your many sins, do not deny the sins, but do as did good old Luther: "Sins, yes, but they have all been laid upon Christ. He is my advocate, who has given me the blessed assurance: *'There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit'* (Romans 8:1)."

III. How may I be certain that I am included in this peace pact eternal? Again I would ask you to read the Christmas Gospel with reflection. What does it say? *"Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."* You are a human being, are you not? Then it is meant for you. Was it not your form He took upon Himself? Was it not your sins He came to remove? Are your sins perhaps so great or so many that the Christ-child is unable to bear them? Then God would be a liar when he assures us: Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound (Romans 5:20). Then it would be but a most vicious exaggeration when He tells us that "the blood Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Then it would not be true, after all, that God really wants to reason with us after this fashion: *"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as wool"* (Isaiah 1:18).

But, thanks be to God, all those precious promises attached to that Child are as true as they are comforting. For it will continue to be true while the earth remains: *This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners* (1 Timothy 1:15). This was the one and only reason for His coming to earth. Do not fly in the face of the most significant fact that has ever been recorded on the pages of the world's history, but accept it in childlike faith unto the salvation of your soul. Amen.



ELS Christmas Altars



Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Belview, Minnesota



Bethany Lutheran Church, The Dales, Oregon

Its size alone demanded your attention: twenty cubits (10 meters) wide, twenty cubits long and 10 cubits high. Its dimensions mirrored the dimensions of the most holy place. As the altar and its sacrifices prefigured Christ – so too the altar stood to fill up to the demands of Divine holiness.

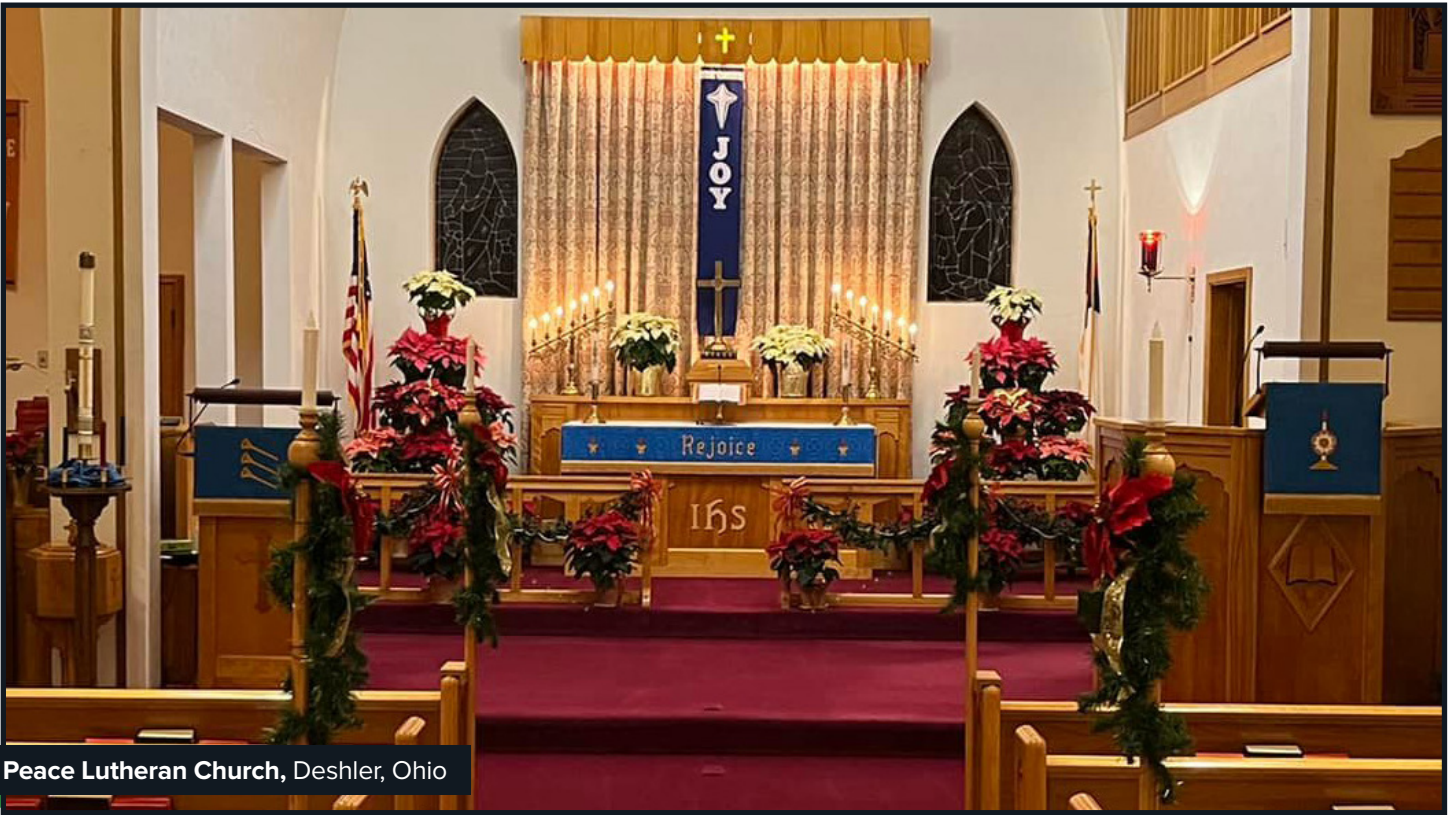
The churches' altars continue to adorn the spaces of God's gathered people and teach of the once-for-all Sacrifice and the filling of God's holy demand in that One sacrifice. What an appropriate thing then that our churches' altars are beautified and draw our attention in the season of Christmas when we celebrate the





Photo courtesy, Dan Browning.

King of Grace Lutheran Church, Golden Valley, Minnesota



Peace Lutheran Church, Deshler, Ohio

giving of God's Son in the flesh – the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world.

Pictured here are a few of our ELS congregations' altars adorned for the Feast of Christ (Christ-Mas). Please feel free to submit pic-

tures (high resolution is important;) of your congregation's altars at Christmas (or other festivals) for future display in these pages.

Kindly send to Pastor Kyle Madson:
pr.madson33@gmail.com

"Glory to the newborn King! Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!"



DEVOTIONAL SERIES

Capitalizing on Advent: Counting Toward Christ



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14
15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

by **REV. TONY PITTENGER**, Contributing Writer,
BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH, Port Orchard, Wash.

How many days until Christmas? When you were a child, this probably seemed like the most important question there was. Your parents may have even done something, or had something, to help you keep track—some kind of “Advent calendar.”

Advent calendars come in many shapes and forms. Growing up, mine was a picture with twenty-four different doors. Each night, we’d open one, read the verse hiding behind it, then say our bedtime prayers.

Advent devotions “capitalize” on the anticipation of Christmas by focusing our attention on God’s Word and all His promises (made and fulfilled) concerning Jesus’ coming.

Some suggestions:

- Use candles like your church uses. They don’t have to be as fancy, but four Advent candles, along with a fifth “Christ Candle,” helps divide the season into four small parts. Let/help children do the lighting. Long-reach “fireplace” matches help their confidence.

- Lead children by setting the example of putting your phone away along with all other distractions. This sends the message that what is about to happen is important.
- Find good, Christ-centered and age-appropriate material. One suggestion is Luke 2:1-20 split into readings for each day. (If you start each night from the first verse, you and your children are likely to learn it by heart.)

In **Luke 2**, we read about Simeon, a man full of faith waiting for the Savior’s birth. Like us, Simeon missed the angels, shepherds, and actual birth, but Simeon was waiting for the first Christmas.

God bless you and your families as you not only count how many days until Christmas, but as you eagerly await Christ’s return.

P.S. Your pastor can recommend good Advent devotionals. Follow this link (<http://tiny.cc/95cdvz>) to download materials especially written for families with children.

