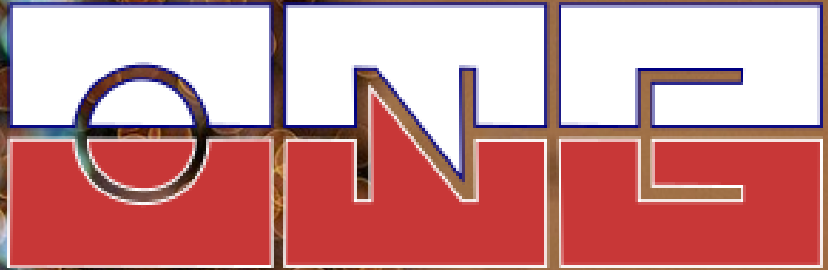


INSIDE:

+ **The Meaning of
Christmas**



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Ellis County Ministerial Alliance

ONE is the official publication of the Ellis County Ministerial Alliance (ECMA) which guides its mission, content, and theme. The ECMA encourage submissions from ECMA congregations. Photographs, stories, testimonies, and other submissions should be directed toward your church leaders or sent via email to

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Advisory Board

Kurt Beyers
Ben Houchen
Anna Towns

Editor

Terri Braun
terribraun91@gmail.com

Editor's Note:

This month we asked our writers, "As Christians and a member/leader of a church community in Ellis County, what does Christmas mean to you?".

Who Would You Want to Follow?

Written by:

Cody Marintzer

I want to take a step back and look at what it would have been like when Christ came into the world. If you have not seen "The Chosen" series special titled "The Shepherd - A story of the first Christmas," please take the time to view it. This episode can give you a sense of the world we are living in today when it comes to the birth of Christ. Many people missed the most amazing event in human history because they weren't looking, were too busy with other affairs, thought they knew better than everyone else, etc. Even some of the moral leaders

at the time missed it because Christ did not fit what they wanted Him to be.

How many people today are missing the beauty of Christmas because they have made it in their image, instead of what it truly is? How many people have no idea what Christmas is because nobody has loved them enough to share Christ's story with them? How many people are opposed to Christmas' true meaning because they are angry with or against God and want to erase this Holy day from our culture? This is what Christ entered into 2,000 years ago, and what He wants us to help Him enter into today.

Christ could have come as the mighty ruler who conquered all and set up His kingdom here on earth. But would that have worked? Why do people follow rulers like this? Many people follow them because of fear. Not the gift of the Holy Spirit "Fear of the LORD" where we fear offending Him because we should love Him above all things, but fear that if we don't follow, we will be punished. Even being the perfect ruler, many would see Him like so many of the false gods of the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and other societies of the time - a superhuman that kicked out the old ruler and is now the one in charge.

Who Would You Want to Follow? (Continued)

What about coming as a superstar who was born into wealth and status? Surely this would get millions of people to follow Him. But for what reason? We know all too well that this is a very superficial following. Superstars come and go. Their followers are with them as long as they are culturally accepted and are still relevant to the zeitgeist. Many would follow Him in the hopes of riding His coattails and maybe being able to enter His entourage with the constant belief that they will suddenly be accepted if they are known to be part of His posse.

Who do you want to follow? Someone who was born with a silver spoon in their mouth and knows nothing of what you suffer? Someone who wields power from the moment they touch down on this earth and doesn't relate to the common man? Or how about someone who came into this world just like all of us? Someone who was taught by parents and was poor. Someone who had to work for a living and

greatly suffered derision, loss of friends, public insult, and denunciation from those in the same faith background as Him. This is why Jesus came as a helpless baby...to know us.

I don't know about you, but I want to follow the God who knows personally what I am going through. The One who taught through example and shows me how to love. The God who humbled Himself to be like me so I could learn to be like Him. Love doesn't force a relationship. Love desires the good of the other and works for it.

This is what is so important about Christmas. We have a God that loved us into existence and has done everything He can to invite us to love Him back. Without Christmas there is no Easter, which means there is no freedom. Everything hinges on the fact that (in the words of St. Athanasius) "God became man, so that we may become God." No, this is

not the heresy of polytheism, but is echoing St. Peter in his second letter where he states, "He has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the Divine nature." What is this Divine nature we share in? It is Christ's attributes of goodness, holiness, and love.

So, as we celebrate the incarnation this Christmas season, may we never forget that we are to be Christ to what is sometimes a hostile world. We should wish people a merry Christmas and don't get bent out of shape if they don't respond in kind, spend more time giving rather than receiving, worship God and thank Him for the gift we can never repay, and bask in the glory of Christ coming to us as a precious child.



Cody Marintzer is the parish life coordinator at St. Nicholas of Myra Church.

Don't Do it Out of Habit

Written by:

Cheryl Glassman

As I began to write my article for Christmas, I thought to myself, "I am actually in a relaxed state of mind!" My house is quiet, outside is overcast and cooler than normal, the dog is snoring (allowed at 11 years of age), and my coffee is pretty tasty. I realized that, although I am mostly spontaneous, I am somewhat a creature of habit.

I am not usually an early riser, but the things I do when I wake up are the same no matter what time I start the day: prayer, tidying myself up, and eating an egg on a piece of toast. I then let the dog out for a 2nd time (Rick is an early riser), go out and check the girls (chickens and donkey) and call my dad. Then it's off to town for whatever lies ahead. Some of you may be thinking, "What does all of this have to do with the upcoming season of Christmas and the church?"

I have been thinking about Christmas and church quite a bit lately. I actually started thinking about it in September, but it has gotten to be a point of interest for me almost daily. I am preparing the church music schedules for December and Christmas planning is now a priority. I was working on this yesterday, when a thought crossed my mind, "Am I doing this out of habit?"

If I am working on the Christmas music for church services at St. Nick's and thinking about the decorating at Our Lady Help of Christians Church and it is just a habit, or something **NEEDING** to be done, then I have lost the reason **WHY** I am doing it! I stopped and opened the little prayer book I keep on the table next to my chair. It is "Minute Meditations from the Popes." The book contains short reflections, bible verses, and a quote from a different Pope for each day. I opened the book and read each reflection

from December 23rd-26th. Here is the reflection from December 26th: "O sweet and gentle infant of Bethlehem, grant us the gift of sharing with our whole soul in this profound mystery of Christmas. Put into other's hearts the peace that they seek so openly and that you alone can give them" by Pope John XXIII.

It was after reading and praying the words of Pope John that I truly understood. I have always felt so honored to be what can be construed as a leader in the church. I (as I do) looked up a definition of leadership. A leader is "someone who inspires passion and motivation in followers." What an honor to help others in the parishes I serve, and especially as we follow Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem!

What a joyful moment when Jesus is born! The music we will sing and share as a church family can create such a beautiful moment; voices joined together singing "Come let us adore Him!"

Don't Do it Out of Habit (Continued)

I also reflected upon the decorations for Christmas. The congregation always arrives early. They are in a low-lit sanctuary, beautiful trees with lights, and a manger scene. All present cannot possibly help but contemplate the wondrous love and birth of Jesus. I hope that the words and music, the décor, communal singing, and opportunities for

communal reflection will, as Pope John says, "put into other's hearts the peace that they seek so openly," that which only the loving presence of our Lord and Savior can give them.

You should prepare your hearts and seek Him through service to others. May this season of joy, wonder, hope, and peace unite us ALL as people

who "inspire passion and motivation in followers." "Joy to the world, the LORD is come! Let Earth receive her KING! Let EVERY heart prepare him room!" MERRY CHRISTMAS!!



Cheryl Glassman is the Director of Music at St. Nicholas of Myra Catholic Church in Hays.

Christmas is Not Just One Day

Written by:

Rev. Jon Anderson

One of my earliest memories of Christmas is from when I was five or six years old. I am the youngest of five children (three girls and two boys). I was born 14 years after my youngest sister. By the time I came along, my older brother was already married. When I was two months old, his wife gave birth to a son. So, at the age of two months, I became an uncle!

One Christmas, our whole family was together, and I remember that the

tree was tall and surrounded by a great many beautifully wrapped presents. I don't remember what anyone got. I remember my nephew and I just mostly sat, taking in the wonder of it all. After a while, all the presents were unwrapped, the wrappings were picked up and thrown away, and the floor beneath the tree was bare. Someone said (I don't remember if it was me, my nephew, or someone else), "It looks like Christmas is over." My older brother then said, "No, it isn't," and walked out of the room.

At that time, my brother was a salesperson working for a company that sold those little toys that back then you could buy from a vending machine for a nickel or a dime, but today often cost more than a dollar. My brother walked back into the living room with two huge sacks that looked just like Santa's pack and set down one in front of me and one in front of my nephew. We each opened our sack, and each sack was full of those little toys: a pair of fake glasses, rings, balls, tops, etc. I remember I had the biggest smile on my

Christmas is Not Just One Day (Continued)

face, and somewhere there's a picture of me sitting and smiling with that sack.

I've remembered and treasured that experience all these years, because it reminds me that Christmas isn't over in a day, or even 12 days. Yes, at some point all the presents are unwrapped, the wrappings thrown away, the tree is taken down, and the wreaths and ornaments are put away for another year. Christmas, though, doesn't really end because the real gift of Christmas keeps coming. The gift of

God's love, the gift of God's mercy, and the gift of God's forgiveness was given to the world in Jesus Christ.

As a young child I didn't understand it. As I grew older, I came to know and appreciate that the true Christmas gift didn't come in Santa's sack, but in a manger, long ago in a faraway place. That gift is given to us by grace through faith and renewed in us each time we gather for worship. The gift of the Christ child is more precious than anything we could possibly get from a

store.

The church's task is to share that gift with the world at Christmas, Easter, and all through the year. I long ago outgrew my delight over toy rings and fake glasses, but I know I will never outgrow my need for the many gifts God bestowed on me and on the world at the first Christmas so long ago.



Rev. Jon Anderson serves Prairie Faith Shared Ministry, a group of four Evangelical Lutheran Churches in America (ELCA) congregations in Western Kansas.

The Unfathomable Mystery of God

Written by:

Rev. Christine Wagner

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;

The hopes and fears of

all the years are met in thee tonight

(Phillips Brooks, 1868)

God's revelation came in human flesh - the tender, perfect flesh of a newborn baby! At last, He arrived, after centuries of silence and waiting and mistaking the king, the conqueror, wealth, money, and influence for the Messiah of God. Oh, we

had hoped for God-with-us and, oh, we had feared God-with-us. Come Lord, set this world straight! End the violence, oppression, poverty, disease, and the seemingly endless sorrow of sin. Rescue us from death and fear. Oh Lord, I am a worthless sinner among sinners. Your purity and brilliance will burn me to a cinder.

The Unfathomable Mystery of God (Continued)

Spare me your coming,
Holy One, for who can
withstand your glory?

Then, there is the tenderness and humility of God. Can anything be more wonderful than God's revelation in the vulnerability of a baby? A young woman's "yes" to the messenger of God created all the space needed for the incarnation, the enfleshment of the uncontainable, the uncontrollable mystery of God-with-us. At Christmastide, we celebrate a mystery so deep as to be unfathomable. The Word is the uncreated essence, being and logos of God, ". . . the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" John 1:14 (ESV).

We have seen the glory of the unfathomable mystery of God in the face

of Jesus. God's revelation in space and time, a moment on which the fate of the whole world hinges. This moment begins in the womb of a young woman and bursts forth in an outbuilding in Bethlehem, somewhere behind the crowded inn. The light bursts forth in angel song spilling over the hills for ears quiet enough to hear and shines across mountains and nations and centuries to be seen by wise and searching eyes longing to see. The Messiah is born! The One for whom we have all been waiting in hope and in fear. Tonight!

This Christmas moment when we celebrate the revelation of God among us, truly has no beginning and no end. But in the wild, reality-ripping, time-smashing, obscure recesses of a stable, cave, or outbuilding on the outskirts of a small Judean city over two thousand years ago, the Messiah, the

Savior of all in need of saving, was born to us - given for us! His life, death and resurrection will teach us who we are and train us in the way we should go. In our failure, He forgives us. He loves us beyond telling and makes a way for us, His way and truth and life, so that we might live abundantly, now and forever. Hallelujah!

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;

Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!



Rev. Christine Wagner is the Transitional Minister at First Presbyterian Church of Hays

You can never truly enjoy Christmas until you can look up into the Father's face and tell Him you have received His Christmas gift. - John R. Rice