

PEACE ON EARTH

GOOD WILL TO ALL MANKIND

"God Leads Us to Goodness"

By Reverend Lea Mathieu, Lone United Church of Christ
In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And God said, "It is very good."
God created human beings with the free will to choose God's goodness or to choose the chaos that is not-God. Throughout the Bible, believers tell of God's efforts to lead us to goodness, to God's intention and hope for humanity and all creation.
God inspired prophets to tell people the truth. Moses said: "I set before you this day life and death, goodness and evil. Choose life."

Isaiah described the ideal ruler of justice and mercy who would lead God's people to true peace: "The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."

Micah made God's will clear: "God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" In the fullness of time, God sent not just a prophet to speak the truth, but a human revelation that is the truth: Jesus Christ, the light of the world, God's intention made flesh. He came to teach and show us that love and life are eternal. At this season, we celebrate the coming to earth of Emmanuel-God With Us.

"Something Happened Here"

By Pastor Tim Van Cleave, Christian Life Center
"There is born to you in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:11.

Years ago, an old pioneer journeyed westward across the great plains until he came to an abrupt halt at the edge of the Grand Canyon. He gawked at the sight before him—a vast chasm one mile deep, 18 miles across and stretching out of sight. He gasped, "Something must have happened here!"

At the Christmas season, anyone who stops to look and listen must ask some questions about what the hustle and noise is all about. A thoughtful man or woman, seeing the light, the decorations, the festivities and the religious services might also conclude, "Something must have happened here!"

Of course, something did happen. God has visited our planet. His Son, Jesus Christ, came to reveal God and to die for our sin (Jn. 1:1-14). It is the best news ever. God became one with us that we might live forever with Him. Remember that it takes more than just merely believing there is a God. The demons believe in God, but are not going to spend eternity with Him in Heaven. The Bible says that we must receive His Son (Jesus) by having a personal relationship with Him. We must accept His Son's sacrifice for our sins.

Have a Merry Christmas!

"Christmas is God Visible"

Pastor Duane Jones, Church of the Nazarene
By J. Grant Swank, Jr., Pastor, Windham, ME.

There are those who do not believe in Christmas. They say they cannot bring themselves to hold to a fanciful story about a baby Jesus being God. How could it be? It does not make sense. Surely God could not bring Himself to that. Only an optimistic sucker would look at an infant in a cow's trough and conclude that that tiny specimen was deity.

Such persons have been labeled by various tags: agnostics, atheists, adherents of other religions, theological liberals, skeptics of religions faith, and the like. Understanding that the Christmas story is far from reasonable according to the world's logic, nevertheless, I believe in the Bethlehem baby as God. I believe this, for it is consistent with the deity of the Old Testament.

For instance, the Bible's invisible God appears to delight in revealing Himself visibly. He cannot do this in full scope to mortal's eyes for His splendor would burn out our retinas. Our eyes are in spiritually fallen bodies; therefore, our visual equipment is inadequate to absorb the divine glory entirely. Our sockets would hold burnt-out retinas if we were to attempt to see the wholeness of God's wonder.

Therefore, in graciousness toward us, He does not make Himself totally visible until we are equipped with the perfect bodies (and perfect visual equipment) for eternity. Nevertheless, God still does attempt to give us sneak previews of Himself. It is evidence of His longing to be with us ultimately in eternity when we can see Him, not through a glass darkly, but face to face. How earnest is His love to take us finally to Himself forever.

In the meantime, God comes to us partially: Old Testament visibilities of God include the Lord appearing to Abraham and Sarah at lunchtime, staying for the meal. It must have been an awesome experience for that couple to play host and hostess to God.

On other occasions, God showed Himself each year in the autumn season to the high priest. God was in the holy flame above the Ark of the Covenant housed in the Holy of Holies.

Still at another time, God presented himself as the fourth person in the fiery furnace when three Hebrew believers were cast alive into the pagan's oven.

These are minor visibilities of deity. Yet they relate a personal God who yearns to come near us. Knowing that our present state prohibits a full-blown visibility, He adapts Himself to the temporary separation.

Further, anxious to make Himself visible, God spoke through Old Testament preachers predicting His incarnate visibility in human form. This was yet another indication of His anticipation for the ultimate embrace with His children.

Eventually, in the fullness of time, the day came. It happened in Bethlehem. Mary was the vessel. Joseph was the caretaker. Cows were the onlookers. Pigeons were cradle tenders. Shepherds were nursery workers. The invisible God made Himself visible in a baby.

Human retinas could take Him in without being burnt. Human arms could hug Him. Human hearts could love Him. It was the eternal made earthly. It was the forever made fathomable. How can this then be believed as history? How can a reasonable person of this world take this in as fact?

Because it is consistent with deity who had revealed Himself in the years previous to the Bethlehem babe. The divine one had made Himself visible in the minor occurrences: mealtime with host and hostess, burning brush, holy flame, fourth comrade in the furnace. Now, in His consistency, He lodged His major earthly visibility in a human being reaching up from the straw.

Understanding this, it then would be inconsistent of deity to do anything other than reveal Himself in a zenith visibility pro-

per for the frail human body. If not becoming incarnate, he would have shown Himself to be either incomplete or less than compassionately powerful.

However, Christmas displays the completeness of the redemption plan in all its heavenly love. Compassion had come to earth. Salvation had been messaged to humankind. Visible Jesus displayed the invisible God.

The entire pageant of the Old Testament tellings then wrapped itself up in the swaddling clothes of humility and holiness. That innocent infant lifted up His hands to take us in. By faith we still see Him and give praise with angels' chorus.

"To See, To Move, To Worship"

By Father Gerry Condon, St. Patrick and St. William Parish
St. Matthew in his Gospel tells us that the Magi came seeking the Christ Child. They said: "We have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him." Those words have a wealth of meaning even for us today.

"We have seen His star." We may not see a star in the literal sense, but from time to time we see something that is different or unusual. It may be an insight, a grace-filled moment, a glimpse of a better way of living. We somehow know that God has let us see this. It may be a realization that we have been on the wrong path of life: it may be that we are encouraged to undertake something for the glory of God. It may be something that brings inner peace of soul. Suddenly, it is there, and our lives are never quite the same afterward.

"We...have come." We have begun the spiritual journey. This is a journey of meeting obstacles along the way, generally struggling, sometimes failing, sometimes victorious. We struggle to overcome our weaknesses and we strive to grow in love of God and neighbor. Along the way there are signposts—prayer, the teachings of the Lord, the companionship of, support of, and encouragement of committed fellow Christians.

"We...have come to worship Him." It remains for us to bow down before Him. We bow not only in body, but also in mind. We become absorbed in prayerful contemplation of the Savior. We feel that this is a glimpse of His divinity, such as was given on Mt. Tabor to Peter, James and John.

Let us take the time, especially in these busy days before Christmas, to see with the eyes of faith, to begin to move along the road of enlightenment, and to come and worship the newborn Savior.

"God Comes into the Real World"

By Father Al Miller, All Saints' Episcopal Church

I can't imagine a more real scene than something which happens in a barn. Sometimes warm and sometimes cold, birth and death, food, water and manure all make up a barn which is used by livestock and animals. The farmer or rancher who sweats over the difficult birth of a calf or a lamb knows that life is precarious, difficult, and that death is not always too far from birth. After "mucking-out" stalls for minutes and hours every day for weeks and months, one realizes that work and livelihood have their boring and less becoming sides to them.

Many people become disenchanted with churches and with their personal faith when it doesn't meet their expectations, or when things happen that upset them. Tragedy or crisis comes along, and the promised joy of faith doesn't seem to ring true. The chore of working at faith is too easily disposed of. The knowledge that life does not become too much different around us, even if our faith grows and our trust in God's will ripens; it makes us frustrated and open to doubt.

This might be precisely why the God of all history chose to become human and be born in such a place as would remind us of a barn. In the midst of the ordinary drumbeat of life, God humbly blesses all of life by coming into the mundane, chore-ridden, birth-and-death world of real life. God reminds us that it is important to understand that life is precious in the first place just by the witness of Jesus' humble birth. God chooses to illuminate our darkness by specifically being present in the very ordinary, tragic and life-giving places of our lives. God is not on some mountain top distantly removed from where you and I live out our lives. God is in our hearts and souls, in our work and in our play, in our joys and in our sorrows. This is the God that Christmas celebrations are about. This is the God who came to be with us, you and me, in our humble lives each day.

May the light who comes into the world be in your hearts and lives this Christmas season.

"Bethlehem Touches Human Need"

By Reverend John Baglien, Hope/Valby Lutheran Parish

Is it so strange that some persons look to the stars for their answers to life's questions? The growing interest in the occult or mystery religions is inevitable if answers to life cannot be found immediately at hand.

If learning in the arts and sciences fails to supply the individual with answers to his needs, why not try the stars?

To me, the most astonishing aspect of Christmas is the story of the wise men who followed a star. Guided by a brilliant star, they arrived at their destination to find a simple, concrete life situation at Bethlehem—a baby boy newly born into a world of poverty and want. While the poverty of this humble family was enough to cry out for their gifts, this was not the primary reason for the wise men being there.

The wise men followed the star and searched out the baby Jesus because they wanted to welcome Him as the promised King of Kings, Lord of Lords. Their first need was to know that God's purpose for their lives was being fulfilled. The star was only a temporary, practical guide to Christ, the Light of the World. "The true Light that enlightens man was coming into the world. To all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God." (John 1:9-11)

No longer did the wise men need to depend upon the stars to guide their lives. And neither do we.

The Christmas story teaches us that God is nearer to us than we think. No need to seek Him in the stars, He is in the everyday world in which we live. This is the mystery of God's eternal love, that in Christ, born of Mary in Bethlehem, He visited our planet. Now we can believe He understands our sorrows and joys, our disappointments and successes, our hunger for daily food and our hunger for justice and righteousness in the world. He is able to communicate with us in the midst of the simple and humble events because He came to Bethlehem.

The only problem I have this night of the Savior's birth is that I myself am far removed from the poverty level of many of my fellow men, to say nothing of the starvation level of many others. And, I have set aside so few gifts to help touch real human need. Perhaps I am only a stargazer and I don't see the Savior of Men

when I see my fellow men in misery and want. Matthew's record is convincing at this point: "Then they will answer, 'Lord when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then He will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not to one of the least of these, you did it not to Me.'" (Matthew 26:43-44)

May our first gift to the Christ child be our life dedicated to the service of our fellow men. As we bow in adoration at the manger, He is nearer than we think and He will renew our faith in the need to give as well as receive, to serve as well as to be served. To be willing to touch the practical problem of poverty and need around us is to be willing to step in on the cold floor at Bethlehem's manger.

There is no need to trust the stars when I find this real Bethlehem world into which God sent His gift of the Christ. He is the gift of love that ministers to the common needs of each one of us. He is the gift offered to all of us who know our own poverty.

"Peace on Earth"

By Reverend Al Trachsel, United Methodist Church

Peace is a stranger to the Twentieth Century. Wars we have had in abundance. The century began with one world war, followed by another even more terrible within a generation. And all this happened before the century was half over.

Almost everybody has an idea of what is meant when the word "peace" is used, but the ideas don't always agree. For most people, the word means the absence of war. Instead of describing peace, they think of an opposite and say what peace isn't—it isn't war.

Arthur Brisbane, noted American editor, wrote these forceful words: "We may sweep the world clean of militarism. We may scrub the world white of autocracy. We may carpet it with democracy and drape it with the flag of republicanism. We may spend energy and effort to make the world a paradise itself, where the lion of capitalism can lie down with the proletarian lamb. But if we turn humankind into that splendid room with the same old heart, deceitful and desperately wicked, we may expect to clean house again not many days hence. What we need is peace conference with the Prince of Peace."

The question being asked today from all walks of life is, "Where does world peace begin?" World peace does not start way over there somewhere. It begins in our hearts and minds.

We need not pack up and head for the Middle East, Bosnia or the Sudan to promote goodwill. Our peace mission is cut out for us here and now...in our hearts, homes, offices, mills, schools and even churches.

Every day and every minute of every day we can follow after the things which make for peace. We can follow after truth, tact and tolerance. We can follow after patience, poise and politeness.

We can follow after love, the things that are lovely and the light of understanding. We can follow after prayer rather than pride, prejudice and pettiness.

When there is peace in the heart, there is peace in the family; when there is peace in the family, there is peace in the community; when there is peace in the community, there is peace in the nation; when there is peace in the nation, there is peace in the world.

Christmas reminds us that there is hope for our battered, bewildered world. The beautiful message of the angels to shepherds long ago was, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men." Amen and Amen!

"A Vision of What is to Come"

By Pastor Andrew Johnson, First Christian Church, Heppner

I have been doing a series of sermons through the minor prophets leading into the advent season and on toward Christmas. This last Sunday, I preached a passage out of Haggai. The text read like this in the New International Version, "I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the Lord Almighty. "The silver is mine and the gold is mine," declares the Lord Almighty. "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," says the Lord Almighty. "And in this place I will grant peace," declares the Lord Almighty." (Hag. 2:7-9)

It is interesting to note that as one looks into the history behind this passage, Haggai is talking about the glory of the temple at Jerusalem. Solomon's temple was a very great splendor and would probably be classified as the eighth wonder of the world. In our human minds, we would have asked God the question of how anything could be more glorious than this?

Haggai writes in the Old Testament the temple that Solomon built has been destroyed and a smaller version, which is far less glorious, is built. And get this—God says through Haggai the prophet that the glory of this temple will be greater than the glorious version Solomon had built.

How can this be? Could it be because of who was in it and not what it looked like? The New Testament was written to tell of a new way God was dealing with mankind. Through His Son Jesus. Most people think that a glorious Christmas is the one where you get the most and best presents. This year, let us re-evaluate what that means. Big temple or smaller temple? More presents or more of His presence that will last an eternity.

May you have a very Merry Christmas.

MCCCF offering two scholarships

The Morrow County Commission on Children and Families (MCCCF) is offering two scholarships to attend the Oregon Governor's School. All Morrow County youth who will be sophomores, juniors or seniors during the 1997-98 school year can apply.

The school is a non-profit organization aimed at developing leadership and citizenship among young people. It provides youth with a year-long, two-phase introduction to leadership development through a blend of practical skills training, civic education, community service, problem solving and adult mentoring.

The commission is looking for mature students with natural leadership potential, who have a willingness to live and work with others and have a commitment to providing sustained service to their communities.

Applications for the school must be completed by March 15 and scholarships will be offered upon acceptance. For application materials and information on the scholarships, students are encouraged to contact their high school counselor, or the MCCCF at 676-9675.

OTLB to meet on December 18

The Oregon Trail Library District's regular board meeting will be held Wednesday, Dec. 18, at 7 p.m. at the OTLD Boardman branch.

The next meeting will be held Wednesday, January 15, at 7 p.m. at the Heppner branch.