

by Greg Albrecht

The KING

who became a man

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood (John 1:14, The Message).

During his reign (1910-1936), King George V of the United Kingdom and the British Empire visited Leeds, a city in the north of England. When he was informed that a school was situated next to the railway line, King George agreed to have the train slow down so that he could appear on a platform and wave to the children as the royal entourage passed.

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What Others Are Saying...

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

“Moving On”

I really enjoy Brad's messages, as they certainly resonate with me as another ex-Evangelical!

Victoria, Canada

A More Christlike God

I finally got around to reading *A More Christlike God* and I highly recommend this book! One of the best books I have read on the perfect revelation of who God is in Jesus and his cross. A must read! Thank you, Brad.

Indiana

“Connected to the Vine”

Thanks for the article, “Connected to the Vine” in the October *CWR* magazine. Yes, I too have had several of those “Aha!” moments over the years. I am trying to remember that all the active verbs (ideally) belong to God and not me. Not sure how this all really works, but it's fun seeing it in this perspective.

British Columbia, Canada

I enjoyed the article, “Connected to the Vine” in the latest *CWRm*. Since I read it, I've been trying to start my day by asking God to “live in me and love through me.” What a difference in how I see and treat others. Thanks for sharing this prayer!

Texas

Grateful

My wife and I started listening to and reading Greg Albrecht ten years ago. I have to tell you that I've seen this ministry mushroom in spiritual growth and me along with it. It has been three years since my wife died, and I think she would be very pleased at the direction *CWR/PTM* has taken.

Canada

I'm no spring chicken, but now in my mid '80s, having been around the religious merry-go-round a few times over the last seven decades, I take enormous delight in learning more about God, about Jesus and about the amazing grace of God from all that you say and do. I'm listening and reading and learning.

Iowa

I am so grateful for *PTM* and I pray for the whole world to find your website and feast on the amazing food in it! Thanks to you *all* and praise to God for you and your heart for Him!

Kentucky

Thank you *CWR/PTM* for opening up the scriptures to reveal a great God of love and grace.

Florida

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Brad Jersak

SENIOR EDITOR: Greg Albrecht

MANAGING EDITOR: Laura Urista

PUBLISHING / CIRCULATION: Dennis Warkentin

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Monte Wolverton

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The King who became a man

Continued from page 1

When the king came outside the train, he wore no outward signs of royalty, but was dressed in a suit, like any other male subject of his kingdom. After the train glided by and the cheers of the children faded, one little girl remained next to the fence by the railroad tracks, sobbing. A teacher came over to console her, and asked the girl why she was crying. *"I wanted to see the king, but I only saw a man!"*

Because he did not come with pomp and ceremony—because he didn't wear the regalia befitting a king—when the Creator of the entire universe, the King of kings and Lord of lords, came into our world in the person of Jesus, many saw only a man who looked like and dressed like everyone else.

Do you remember the old fairy tale where a beautiful

world—"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14, *The Message*).

- Christmas proclaims the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, when God identified with us in the miracle we often refer to as the Incarnation. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Christmas is not merely a footnote in a dusty old history book, but a living reality, because the risen Jesus Christ is alive! As he demonstrated God's love in his earthly life, he continues, in our lives right now, to demonstrate his love for us by getting involved in the nuts and bolts of our lives. Christmas is the announcement that the

The woman was all but invisible.

As the church-going, religious people attending the dinner tried to ignore her presence, Jesus asked Simon. "Do you see this woman?" (Luke 7:44). What did Jesus see when he looked at people like this woman?

"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). *During his earthly life Jesus saw and experienced the real struggles and heartaches faced by those to whom he ministered.* He came here, as God in the flesh, to know us and demonstrate his compassion and empathy for us.

***God assures us, in his Christmas card,
"How can I ever forget you?
In Christ, I became one of you!"***

princess kissed a frog and the frog was transformed into a handsome prince? When God came to be one of us, in the person of Jesus, the fairy tale reversed itself. God, demonstrating his love for all humanity, "kissed us" and promptly became a "frog" like us.

- **God involved himself in our lives** by becoming one of us—he enfleshed the love of God, and in his person revealed his willing vulnerability so that he was not immune from the life experienced by his creation.

- Christmas is the announcement of the time when **God inhabited our**

Captain of our salvation has arrived at the front lines, to be with us in our trenches and in our foxholes.

You may remember the story about a man named Simon who hosted Jesus at a dinner. During the dinner a woman of questionable character crashed the party to see Jesus. At best Simon viewed this woman as an uninvited guest, someone who was not entitled to be present in his home because of her lack of social status. Reading between the lines of this account (Luke 7:36-50), we presume that Simon also disdained her, thinking her to be a contemptible street person, the scum of the earth.

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A Christmas Card from God

What do we see when we consider Jesus? *Let's not allow the troubles of this world, which are overwhelming, to distract us from the love of Christ.* And there are many real distractions which can take our focus off Christ—wars, terrorist threats and atrocities, and perhaps closer to home, unemployment, illness, disease and the ongoing difficulties we experience with family and friends.

When we see the lights of Christmas, let's be reminded that Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12). When and if you give a gift, remember that "God so loved the world that he GAVE his one and only son..." (John 3:16, my emphasis). *Look for expressions and evidence of God's love instead of controversy and strife, which can distract our focus from Jesus Christ.*

Ronald Reagan is one of my favorite U.S. presidents. Toward the end of one of his campaign speeches in 1979, a senior citizen cried out from the audience, "Mr. Reagan, everything you have said sounds fine. But what about us old folks? Have you forgotten us?" The man who was about to become the oldest president of the United States smiled down at her and said, "Forget you? Heavens, how could I forget you? I am one of you!"

"I AM One Of You" is the Christmas card God sends to each of us! When God, through an angel, informed Joseph that Mary would give birth to Jesus, he said: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, 'God with us.'" (Matthew 1:23). God assures us, in his Christmas card, *"How can I ever forget you? In Christ I became one of you!"*

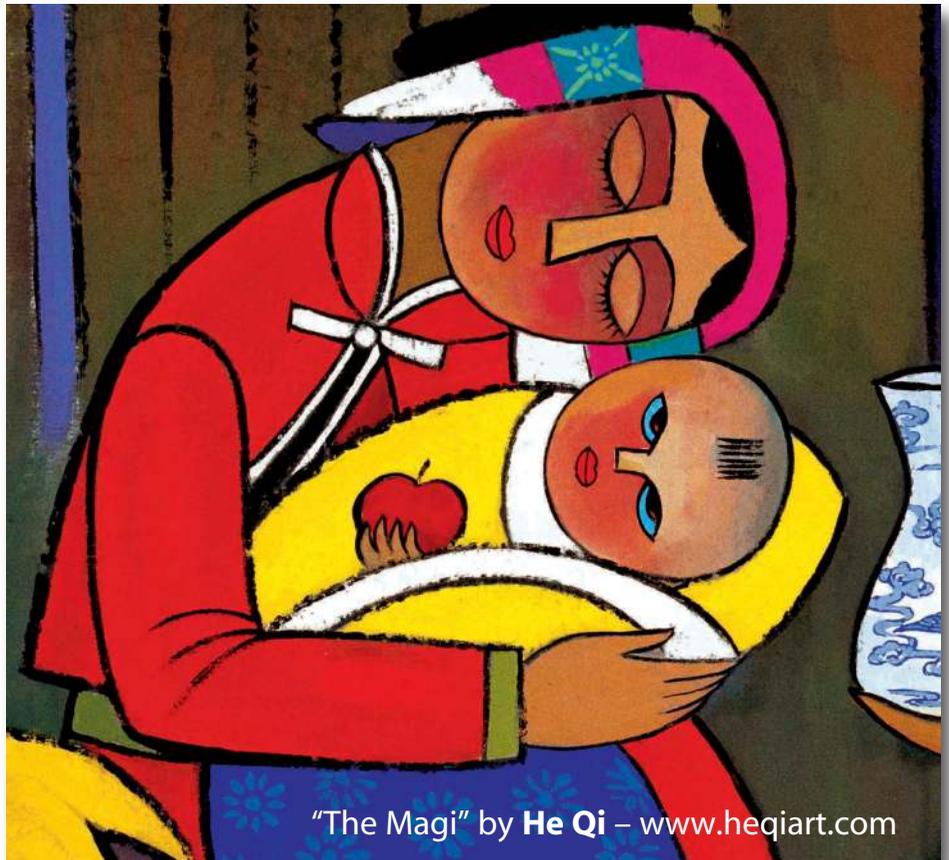
When my all-time favorite president, Abraham Lincoln, was campaigning for the presidency, he received a letter from an eight-year-old girl. The young girl

suggested that Lincoln should grow a beard to hide his rather homely face. Lincoln wasn't offended—he read the letter and sent a thank-you to the girl. He told her that if his campaign travels ever took him close to her home town that he would like to personally meet her.

The father of the young girl was one of the movers and shakers in the little town, and when his daughter received a personal response from Lincoln, he told

When the day came, practically the whole town was waiting at the train station. Everyone was dressed up, the band was ready—everyone except, it seemed, the young girl to whom Lincoln had written.

Before the train arrived in town, it had to stop for repairs. Because the train was so close to the town, we're told Lincoln decided to walk into town, and he took the little girl's address with him. He walked past the train station unnoticed, and walked through



"The Magi" by He Qi – www.heqiart.com

the other officials in town the great news. Abraham Lincoln might come to their little town!

According to the story, Abraham Lincoln remembered his promise to the girl and informed his staff that if his campaign train was scheduled to pass near her town, he wanted to stop. It turned out that his campaign schedule included traveling through that area, so the girl (and her father and the town officials) soon heard the good news that Abraham Lincoln was going to visit their town!

the deserted streets of the town until he found the girl's house. He knocked on the door, introduced himself to the maid (who was speechless) and asked to see the young girl. The young girl and a friend were having a tea party, pretending to drink tea out of little tea cups.

They invited Mr. Lincoln to join them and poured him a cup of pretend tea.

So, there sat Abraham Lincoln with those two eight-year-old girls, drinking pretend tea. After a while he asked the little girl if she liked

his new beard, and then excused himself to walk back to the train.

He's Never Too Busy

Remember that time when Jesus' disciples were trying to keep Jesus away from small children because they felt Jesus was just too busy for little children? Jesus told the disciples that unless they became like children they would never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:1-4).

Many labor under the false impression that God is so busy with emergencies and high-level, far-reaching meetings and appointments that he would never have the time for us.

But the story of Christmas is the story of God moving into the room, or the apartment or the house next door to you. He is your neighbor! He is one of us! "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14, *The Message*). □

Greg Albrecht is President of Plain Truth Ministries.

THE GREAT SCANDAL! THAT GOD BECAME MAN

BRAD JERSAK

Apes becoming man? C'mon, mate—that's not scary! You want to know what's really scary? **GOD becoming man!**

I admit, the bluster of this stereotypical Irishman has set me on my heels. And he isn't done yet!

"That's the scandal of Christianity!" he bellows, eyes as wild as his hair, waiting for my reaction.

"Smoke?" he asks, thrusting a carton my way.

"I beg your pardon?"

Oh, I see. My prof is offering me a cigarette.

"Uh, no thanks," I decline, as he lights up.

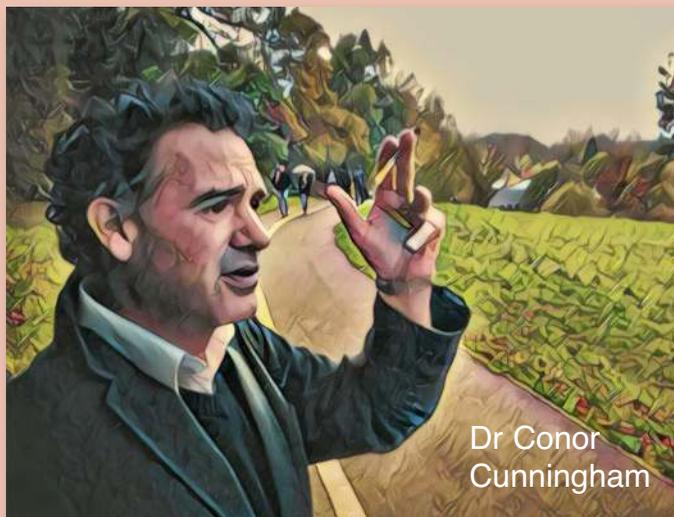
This is Dr. Conor Cunningham—philosopher, theologian, scholar. He's also my faculty host at the University of Nottingham, where I stayed as a "visiting scholar" in 2014.

It would take nine weeks for him to unpack his first sentences. It took me another two years to work them out as I composed my book, *A More Christlike God*. I will attempt to do so yet again in a few pages.

Cunningham's *Darwin's Pious Idea*¹ is easily the best researched text I've read to this day. It's why I made a trek to the UK, endured a single dorm cell without my wife and chained myself to a library for months. His thesis is that both the conservative creationists and their new atheist opponents are barking up the wrong tree, each tribe profoundly

mistaken in their quest for truth.

Ultimate truth is decidedly *not* found in bantering over whether or how apes evolved into human beings.



"Apes becoming man?" he guffaws. "You think that's a threat to Christian faith?"

He rolls his eyes, exasperated. In Conor's BBC documentary, *Did Darwin kill God?*² he introduces the topic this way:

"I'm a huge admirer of Charles Darwin. His theory of evolution is one of the greatest

contributions to science. 150 years ago, his theory changed mankind's perception of life on earth, forever. I believe religious alternatives like creationism and intelligent design are nonsense.

You may think that that would make me an atheist, but I am a Christian. I believe in God."

But Cunningham is not merely referring to "G-O-D," as in some vague and vacuous notion or abstract philosophy. That's not scary either—that's simply innocuous, feeble.

No, do you what to know what's really scary? My crazy Irish prof will tell ya: **God becoming man!**

God becoming man!

The truth we seek—the ground of our being—isn't found in the ever-shifting genealogies of natural science or in misguided Noah's Ark theme parks. It will never be unveiled in the wearisome creation-evolution debates.

The truth we seek is found in this scary (i.e. scandalous) reality: God becoming man! AKA: "the incarnation." John 1:14 testifies that the eternal, divine Word—with God and as God—assumed human nature and "became flesh"—not just *humanity* (Greek *anthropos*) but *flesh* (Greek *sarx*).

This means that when God became human, we're not merely talking about the humanity of innocent, unfallen, un-cursed Adam. Rather, God took on "the likeness of sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3)—all the passions, frailty and mortality of the descendants of fallen Adam—"yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

God the divine Son assumed the human condition to restore and renew every aspect of broken humanity. The eternal

Light entered our darkness and shone to expel that darkness with the light of love and truth.

The Scandal of Christianity

What did Dr. Cunningham mean when he claimed that God becoming man is "the scandal of Christianity?"

He would go on to explain how the Incarnation of the eternal God in the weakness of human flesh was scandalous to those

preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block [Gk. scandalon] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

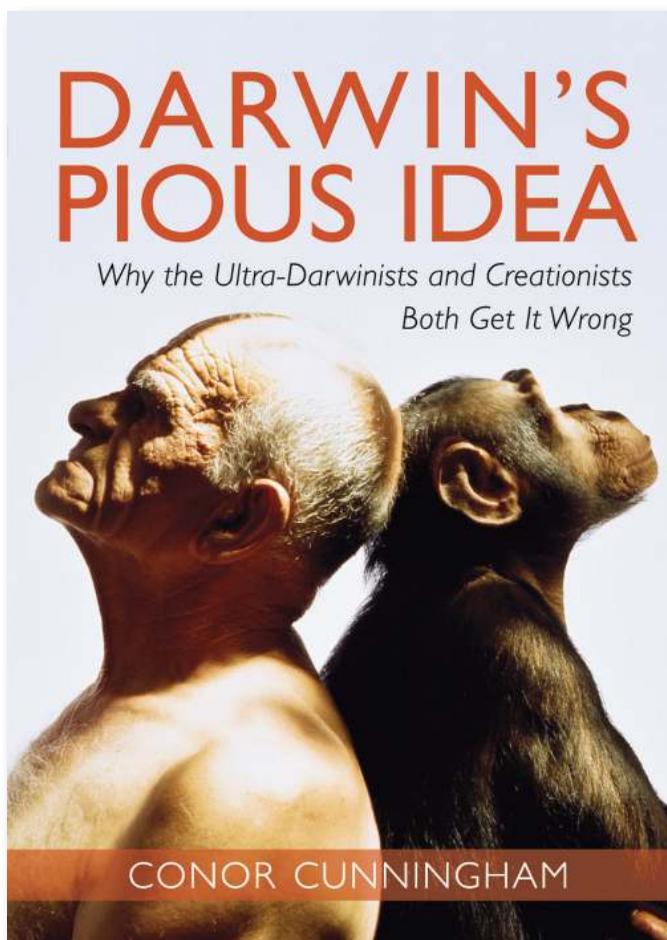
To emphasize this truth, Dr. Cunningham coined the phrase, "radical orthodoxy." He isn't claiming something more radical than Christian orthodoxy. Rather, radical orthodoxy insists there is simply nothing more radical than the historic Christian confession that God became man. Everything next to that is bland. Every aberration we call heresy—every departure from the Incarnation—is flaccid by comparison. There is no known claim more radical than this: Jesus Christ is forever both fully God and fully man.

How can God "become"?

In John 1:14, that word "became" can be puzzling. How can God, who cannot change (James 1:17), also be said to "become." I discovered a helpful explanation in a popular Greek Lexicon:

*"...this verb does not mean 'became' in the sense 'was changed into,' as when a chrysalis is changed into a butterfly and thereby ceases to be a chrysalis, but has the sense 'took on' or 'assumed'... a new, additional form of existence, as when a woman becomes the mother of her firstborn."*³

In other words, the divine Word (*logos*) became what God was not—flesh (*sarx*)—without



who first encountered him—especially in God's scandalous new capacity for humiliation and death! Some could not worship the almighty God when he revealed himself in human form, and especially in weakness.

As the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:21-25,

"For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was

ever ceasing to be what he was—God (*theos*). What makes this so radical is that God’s new form of existence as “the God-man” is “not temporary and reversible, but permanent and irreversible.”

Think on that. The perfect union of all that God is with all that we are, without in any way compromising either. That’s why we say this one

...the Incarnation of the eternal God in the weakness of human flesh is scandalous!

indivisible Person, Jesus Christ, is both *fully* God and *fully* man—not just a 50-50 hybrid.

Theologians call this the “*hypostatic union*,” but fear not—that \$50 phrase simply and mysteriously means that in the one Person (Christ) we have both natures (human and divine) in full measure.

That’s a paradox, but it’s one that parents may understand by analogy. Say you’ve had your firstborn and that child wins your whole heart. But then one day, you are expecting a second. “Oh no!” you might think, “how will this work? How will I divide the love up?” And of course, when the second child comes, you discover that your heart is not a pie to be sliced up. Both children win your whole heart! And if, like Eden and I, you have a third, again, your heart is filled with love for that child. It’s a miracle and a paradox, but that’s how love works.

So too, this union of God and man in Christ is a perfect union of divinity and humanity, filling his whole person with infinite love for us—for you, for me and for the whole world!

Is it any wonder, then, that the angelic messenger would announce, “*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.*” (Luke 2:10).

The whole-hearted love of God has entered our world in that glorious, scandalous God-man! This is the good news. We don’t need to be afraid any more, because Israel’s Messiah and the world’s Savior has shown us that God is self-giving love. And by love, this same Christ has determined to stop at nothing to redeem what was lost, restore what was broken and bring the cosmos to fulness in himself—so that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28). □

Brad Jersak is editor-in-chief of CWR Magazine and author of A More Christlike God.

NOTES

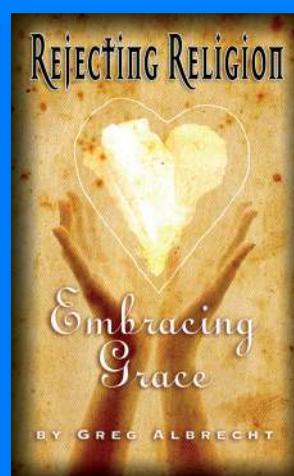
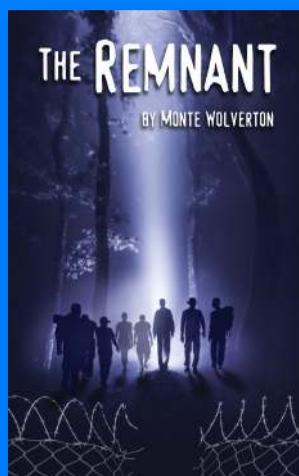
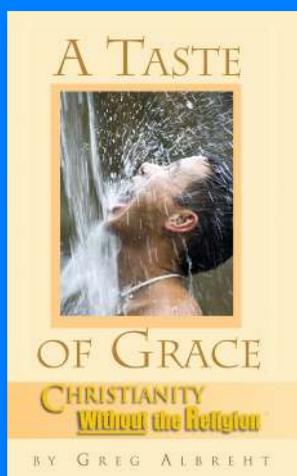
1. Conor Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Eerdmans, 2010).

2. Conor Cunningham, “Did Darwin Kill God?” BBC2, 2009.

3. Murray Harris, *John: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (B&H Academic, 2015).

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God With Us

Eden Jersak

I feel privileged to have grown up in a Mennonite family. This Christmas marks 70 years since my father (Jacob) came to Canada from the Ukraine as a refugee (in 1947), at the tender age of 13, accompanied by his mother (Maria), his grandmother (Elizabeth), and his older sister (Irma) and brother (Ernest).

As a young child I overheard stories of my grandfather (Opa) not coming home from work one day. He'd been taken by the Communists and held in an internment camp as an enemy of the state, along with many other Mennonite men in his German speaking village.

I listened quietly as my grandmother (Oma) told the



Maria Wiebe (Oma) with Ernest, Jacob & Irma

story of trying to see her husband as Christmas 1937 approached, hoping desperately to pass on a bit of news to him. A neighbor, who was able to smuggle letters to the prisoners, passed a note from Maria to Jacob, and in return she received a message that consisted of two letters, "FW"—*Frohe Weihnachten*, Merry Christmas. Oma was just 31-years-old when she was left with three young children and her invalid mother.

I would try not to move when she told these stories, for fear I might be asked to leave. I knew I was listening to something sacred, and I was always interested in hearing more. The stories continued: stories of paralyzing fear, surprising plot turns and amazing redemption.

THE MENNONITES: PEOPLE, FAITH & CULTURE

The **Mennonites** are more than a Christian denomination (like Lutherans or Baptists). Mennonites are a people group, like the Jews or Romani, with a heritage of persecution, wandering, colonies and cultural markers, such as specific names, foods, dress and even language (*Plautdietsch*). Oma's story is part of that long heritage.

Their spiritual roots go back to a cluster of early 16th century Dutch, Swiss and German movements labeled "the Radicals" or "**Anabaptists.**" The Anabaptists sought a third way beyond Catholicism or Protestantism, emphasizing the Jesus Way of discipleship, peacemaking and the priesthood of all believers. For this reason, they were martyred en masse until **Menno Simons** (a former priest) gathered the remnants and led them East in search of peace.

Persecution and repeated relocation made them insular (because of language, culture and outcast status), so they worked and worshipped together in communities and sometimes formed colonies.

Eden Jersak's family were German-speaking Anabaptists originally from Holland who moved to Germany, Prussia, then to the Ukraine as guests of the Tsarina **Catherine the Great**. In 1763, she gave each family 165 acres of farmland and issued an edict

declaring them completely free "for all time." However, after the **Russian Revolution** (1917) and through to World War II, waves of Mennonite immigrants fled Europe to settle in the US, Canada, Mexico and Paraguay.

Mennonite settlers established congregations and faithfully practiced the Jesus Way, attracting non-ethnic Mennonites into their fellowships. Others drifted into Christ-less religion (traditionalism and legalism). Still others have abandoned Christian faith altogether, but would still identify with their Mennonite cultural heritage. □

Oma realized that she would have to take her children and mother, and flee the Ukraine. So in 1943, they boarded a train and headed for Nazi-occupied Poland. There they were housed in a village by a kind woman whose husband was fighting in the resistance movement. The woman really had no choice in housing them—it was dictated to her—but she was kind to them nonetheless.

In January of 1944, the village was given a warning to evacuate

in his car and asked what on earth they were still doing in the village, because everyone should have already evacuated.

My Oma explained the situation and the officer mentioned there were a few trucks being repaired in the village and that one of them would pick them up shortly. A few hours later, they were on their way in the back of an army truck, sitting on cold gas cans in the dead of winter.

They had not traveled far—the

right as a little girl: these stories were sacred, they held a weight to them, and were significant to Oma's faith and to mine.

We all have life stories about our journeys and our loved ones. As we struggle to find meaning in these events, I offer four passages—a progression that allows us to see a bigger picture than when we "cherry-pick" just one verse or passage to prove a point.

We'll see a trajectory—a learning curve—that starts with the Israelites in the desert, touches down in the Psalms, meets the woman at the well, and finally concludes in Romans.

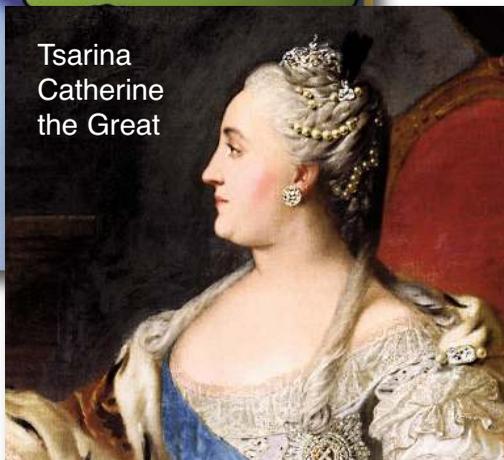
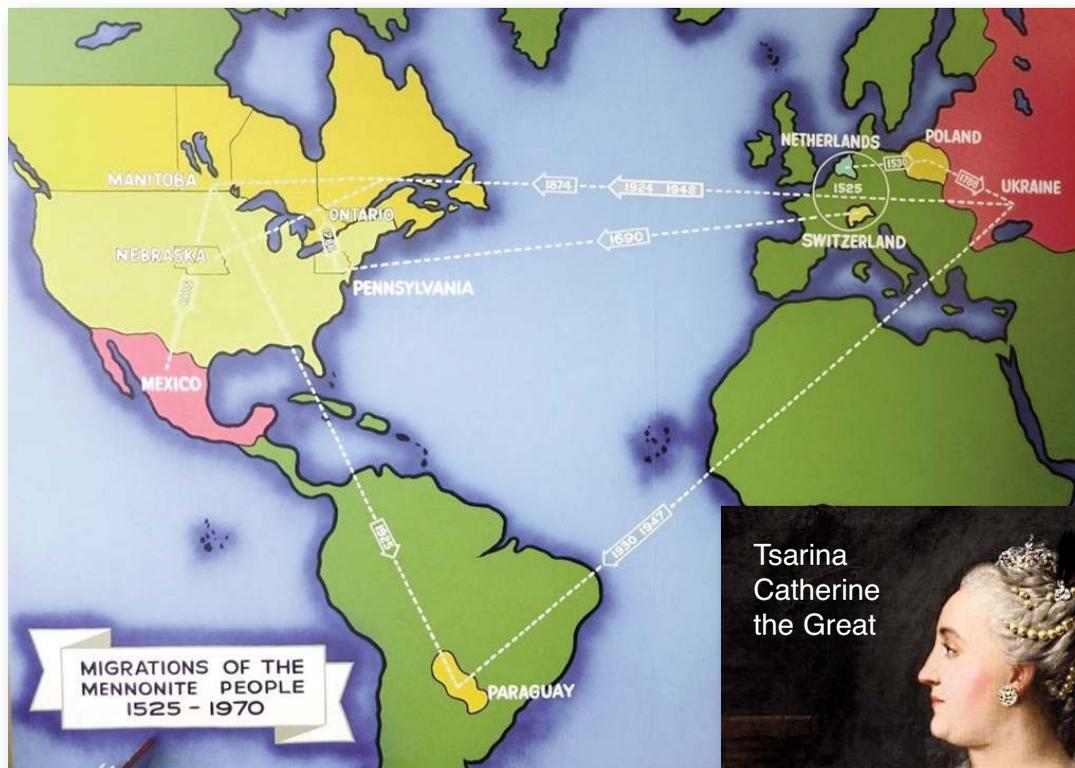
I share these thoughts because it's what I'm living right now! For me, this is not a theory or an ideology—this is the kind of truth we can stand on—solid and firm. I pray it will help readers rise above whatever life throws you!

Wrong Question

In Exodus 17:1-7, we find the Israelites in the desert. They are thirsty—whining and complaining—and wishing they were

back in Egypt as slaves to a tyrant! They grumble to Moses and ask a dangerous question—**"Is God here with us or not?"**

The reason it's a dangerous question is that it allows circumstances to dictate whether God is with you. We all know life happens—situations creep into our lives that might make us wonder if God has left the building. But it's the wrong



Tsarina Catherine the Great

as the Germans were retreating from the advancing Russians. Convoys of trucks and vehicles drove through the village, stopping to pick up the fleeing villagers, but no one stopped for my father's family. Elizabeth was an invalid and unable to walk, and as the village emptied out, the five of them were left behind. As my Oma looked around, she raised her arms and called out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?"

Shortly after her desperate plea, a German officer pulled up

next city was only six miles away—but as they approached the city, it became clear that it had been bombed and utterly destroyed only hours before. And many of the people who had fled their village before they had been caught in that attack and were now dead.

Oma eventually got her mother and children to Canada, after many more trials and "God stories" along the way. I was

question. Spending too much time giving it attention will likely send you into a spiral.

Where It Leads

Psalms 95 provides an example. It references the same event in Exodus 17, and it presents the serious problem this question precipitates. Starting in verse 7, the Psalmist thinks of Exodus 17 as “the Bitter Spring Uprising.” You can hear the frustration in the author’s pen—is he speaking for Moses or for God himself? Either way, the frustration is palpable!

The frustration is about their long history of amazing God-stories—everything from plagues to seas dividing to food falling from the sky. Apparently this wasn’t enough—they want a Slurpee on a hot day—they want water, *now!* Suddenly they are sure: God has left them!

The final verse of the Psalm makes clear what is a stake. “They’ll never get where they’re headed, never be able to sit down and rest” (Psalm 95:11, *The Message*).

Egypt is not actually very far from Israel—just 423 kms (263 miles) if you take the long way home. The journey should have taken about 40 days—not 40 years! They couldn’t get where they were headed because they didn’t understand that God was with them ALL the time—even when circumstances seemed otherwise. When we forget our history with God—the times when his presence was evident to us—and instead get distracted by the wind and the waves—we

sink, we spiral, and we lose heart.

The dangerous consequence of forgetting God’s faithfulness to us is that we don’t get where we’re going—we never get to sit down and rest. The torment of believing God has left us derails us and leaves us without peace. Personally, I can’t afford to lose either my way or my peace.



“The Woman at the Well” - Diego Rivera

What Jesus provided

In the Gospel of John, chapter 4, we meet a woman who finds herself chatting with Jesus at a well. He knows far more about her than she has offered, and she begins to see he is no ordinary man. Again, the topic is water and thirst—at least on the surface—and Jesus starts in about God’s goodness: “If you knew the generosity of God—” Jesus points to God’s record, God’s history, God’s faithfulness—God’s ability to meet needs on an even deeper

level than we’d dare ask.

The Israelites were thirsty in the desert—and this woman is thirsty too—but H₂O is not what is going to meet the need! That’s why Jesus says to her, “I am HE. You don’t have to wait any longer or look any further” (verse 26, *The Message*). Let’s remember: the Saviour was to be called,

“Emmanuel”—God with us! Here is Jesus’ declaration: God is generous—look at his track record—and here I AM—*still* with you!

This revelation of “God with us” ignited an awakening in what Jews considered an inferior version of faith—it surprised the disciples.

In the midst of this story, Jesus says something startling: “But the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you’re called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter. It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit

of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration” (John 4:23-24, *The Message*).

Now that is a red letter quote from Jesus! I’m going to let that hang there because I certainly can’t unpack all it means! But here is *one simple takeaway—*

don't judge others because of where they live, what language they speak, or the name they have given God.

Apparently that isn't a big deal to God—he's interested in us on a much deeper level.

The Answer

Finally we come to Romans 5, where we see where we should be heading—the trajectory of living in the understanding that God is with us, regardless of any circumstances that would try to dictate otherwise.

“We throw open our doors to God—” (verse 2). In other words, **we quit asking the wrong question!** We let go of questioning if God has left us. We ask God to open our eyes, recognizing that he is with us—that we desire to see him here too!

Paul continues, “We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us.” Knock and the door will be opened, seek and you will find—look and you will behold that he is right beside you, never having left you or forsaken you!

And then we see where we will stand. Verse 2 continues, “We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting praise.”

That's a glorious destination—a place where there's space for you to be your truest self—to have plenty of perspective over circumstances—a place to ride the waves instead of being

swallowed by them—a place to curl up with Jesus instead of wondering where he's gone.

There's more—and I want you to take all of this in!

“There's more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into or lives through the Holy



EDEN JERSAK WITH BLESSING
IN SOUTH AFRICA

Spirit” (Romans 5:3-5, The Message).

And there we have it: when we remember God's faithfulness and generosity throughout our lives—when we tell the stories and re-live the moments of our glimpses into the wonder of God's presence in our day-to-day lives—we realize he is undeterred by circumstances life throws at us! We will let go of wondering if God is with us or not. He will remind us of the ways he has

shown his presence in our lives. And we will open our doors only to find that he has already opened up his doors to us.

Blessing

My husband Brad and I went to South Africa in February to visit friends. During that time, I received an invitation to give a message when we returned back home.

It's been a few years since I've preached, and I have seldom missed it! My first reaction was a groan, and then the old tape began to play in my head. “Nobody wants to listen to you. You no longer have a voice. Better just be quiet!”

One day, we took a trip an hour up the road. We stopped for lunch at a restaurant I'd describe as rustic at best—open walls, a tented roof, an open-pit fire with heavy pots, boiling something I wasn't sure I wanted to know about. I thought to myself, “Well girl—you are in Africa!”

We sat on lumpy chairs and swatted flies while perusing the menu. A young African woman served us drinks, helped with the

menu and finally took our order. I began to respond to a question she asked when mid-sentence, she interrupted me and said, “I love your voice! I could listen to it all day long! You should be on the radio—I would put it on and listen all afternoon.”

This is my “God story”—God coming close to me. Even as I was tentatively opening my door to him, he had already

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Good News of Great Joy

Laura Urista

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:8-12 emphasis added).

Isn't it ironic that God chose to send the birth announcement about his Son to lowly shepherds? Luke doesn't tell us much about these shepherds. Luke 2:8 only says "...there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night." Although shepherding was once considered a noble profession, by the time we come to the first century shepherds were considered the lowest class of people—coming in just ahead of the lepers. They were deemed ceremonially unclean and considered untrustworthy, brash and rude.

Here's a quote about the Bethlehem shepherds from Max Lucado's book *God Came Near*.

God tapped humanity on its collective shoulder. "Pardon me," he said, and eternity interrupted time, divinity interrupted carnality, and heaven interrupted the earth in the form of a baby. Christianity was born in one big heavenly interruption. Just ask the Bethlehem shepherds. We know so little about these men.... But this much we can safely assume: they

had no expectations of excitement... Nor did they want any. Any excitement was bad excitement—wolves, mountain lions, poachers. Shepherds treasured the predictable. They coveted the calm. Their aim was to be able to tell their wives, "Nothing happened last night." Just because they wanted a calm night, however, didn't mean they would get it.

"Then an angel of the Lord stood before them. The glory of the Lord was shining around them, and they became very frightened." (Luke 2:9 NCV) Change always brings fear before it brings faith.



Scripture repeatedly shows that Jesus came to the lowly, the despised and the neglected in order to show his great compassion. The Bethlehem shepherds help us see that God has a message for even those considered the least, the lost and the last—**everyone matters to God**.

At first the shepherds were terrified at their close encounter with God, but eventually they experienced great joy so that they didn't just accept the message they received, they quickly acted upon it. Shepherds were used to meandering through the fields while their flocks grazed. They weren't typically known for hurrying to do anything. But due to the shepherds' great joy and excitement "...they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger" (Luke 2:16).

Love Versus Fear

Think of something that brings you **GREAT JOY**. Maybe art, music or other hobbies have brought you great joy since you were a child—but in the hectic life of an adult you've lost interest.

I have always enjoyed singing from an early age. One of my earliest joyful memories is of swinging as high as I could at a park near Grandma's house, singing my favorite song at the top of my lungs, "Joy to the world, all the boys and girls, joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea, joy to you and me!"

Now think of something that sucks all the joy out of your life. The main one I think of is **FEAR**. FEAR of doing the wrong thing and getting ridiculed, FEAR of trying new things, FEAR of failure, FEAR of punishment.

Has your relationship with God been derailed or destroyed because of fear? Maybe you've heard that God is just waiting for you to mess up so he can fry you for all eternity.

But Jesus came to show us in person that **God IS love**. God is not a cosmic corrections officer. His core identity is that of a loving, caring Daddy whom Jesus called "Abba."

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18).

Christ's perfect love in us overcomes the fear that sucks the joy out of life. And as we allow his perfect love to flow out through us to others, we can experience joy in sharing the good news of eternal life made available to all.

That's good news of great joy for all the people! Joy to the world—joy to you and me! □

Laura Urista still finds great joy in singing—as a worship leader, choir member and part of a female quartet called "Joyful Voices."

Waiting for God to Act

Brian Zahnd

Advent is for waiting. As we tell the story of redemption through the church calendar we begin our telling of the sacred story, not with doing, not with celebrating, but with waiting—**waiting for God to act.**

Yet most of us—children of a high-tech, high-speed, instantaneous age—are not very good at waiting. It feels too much like doing nothing, and we are the driven ones who take pride in being busy. Waiting is not really our thing.

Or worse yet, waiting feels too much like lamenting, which is closer to the truth. With the loss of a strong sense of the Christian calendar we have conflated Advent and Christmas into a single “holiday season.” But the truth is that **Advent is quite different from Christmas as it carries its strong theme of prophetic lament.** The world has gone wrong, justice lies fallen in the streets, and it seems that God is nowhere to be found. That’s when the lamentation of waiting arises in our soul: “*O Lord, how long?*” From Isaiah to Malachi there is a consistent theme of waiting in lament for God to act. All of the Hebrew prophets, each in their own way, composed their prophetic poems around this recurring theme: The Lord is coming, God is about to act, but for now...we wait.

And yet the waiting is essential. For it’s in the waiting that our soul grows quiet and contemplative and cultivates a capacity for awareness by which we can discern what God is doing when he does act.

We have been seduced by an idolatry that deceives us into thinking that God is mostly found in the big and loud, when in fact, God is almost never found in the big and loud. The ways of God are predominantly small and quiet. *The ways of God are about as loud as seed falling on the ground or bread rising in an oven.* The ways of God are almost never found in the shouts of the crowd; the ways of God are more often found in trickling tears and whispered

So we are waiting for God to act, but *I would suggest that we are not so much waiting for God to act as we are waiting to become contemplative enough to discern what God is doing.*

God is always acting, because God is always loving his creation. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are always inviting us into their house of love. But when we are consumed by anger, harried by anxiety, and driven by impatience, we are blind and deaf to what God is actually



prayers. We want God to do a big thing, while God is planning to do a small thing. We are impressed by the big and loud. God is not. We are in a hurry. God is not. We want God to act fast, but Godspeed is almost always slow.

doing in the present moment.

When God broke into history decisively through the Incarnation, who discerned it? Not the Pharisees whose religious movement was loudly predicting that God was about to act. Not the scribes and priests

Waiting for God to Act by Brian Zahnd

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who were the professional experts in prophetic scripture.

Instead it was pagan stargazers and peasant shepherds who discerned what God was doing. They were not the experts and they were not the reactionaries at the loud center of religious noise; they were quiet people on the silent edges of contemplative thought.

Gazing at stars and keeping watch by night are profound metaphors for the contemplative life. To most people, it would appear that the Magi and the shepherds were doing nothing of significance in their long nighttime vigils, but they were the ones who were able to discern what God was doing. It was contemplative stargazers and shepherds, having learned how to wait in silence, who found their way to Bethlehem. They were the ones who discerned what God was doing in the seemingly ordinary event of a young woman giving birth in an out of the way place.

Waiting for God to act only seems like waiting for God to act. God is always acting because *God is always loving the world and always giving birth to something*. Waiting for God to act is actually waiting for your soul to become quiet enough and contemplative enough to discern what God is doing in the obscure and forgotten corners, far from the corridors of power or wherever you think the action is.

We want God to act in the imperial capital of Rome, but God first acts in a stable on the edge of Bethlehem.

We want God to act in Washington, DC, but God first acts in the quiet corner of your own living room.

So, let me say this to you quite confidently: **God is about to act**. God is about to act in your life and in our world. But if you want to discern the actions of God you must learn to first wait in quiet contemplation.

Before you can become an activist, you must first become a contemplative; otherwise you'll just be a re-activist. And re-activists merely recycle anger and keep the world an angry place. Jesus was a contemplative activist, but never a re-activist.

So, learn to gaze at the stars. Learn to keep vigil in the fields. Learn to sit with Jesus. Learn to be quiet. Learn to wait. Then, and only then, will you begin to discern what God is doing.

May this Advent help prepare you to discern what God is about to do in your life and in our world. □

Brian Zahnd pastors in St. Joseph, MO. He is the author of Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God.

God With Us by Eden Jersak

(continued from page 11)

flung his doors open to me! This young woman spoke directly to those diminishing messages of doubt that I had been listening to for days—and the kicker—this young Ugandan woman, who I crossed paths with randomly on a trip to South Africa, was named “Blessing,” so appropriately named by her mother!

Brad and I have recently been overtaken by situations and circumstances that could leave us asking the wrong question and forgetting God’s history and record of being there with us.

Instead, I am standing in a spacious place—an open space where God’s grace and glory allow me to stand tall and even shout praise!

Meditation

In closing, I offer some questions that I hope will bring to remembrance your “God stories.”

1. Do you feel vulnerable to getting stuck in the question, “Is God with me or not?” If so, what might that cost you?

2. Do you have some “God stories”—instances where you felt God’s nearness to you—where you recognized that Christ is Emmanuel: God with you?

3. When was the last time you shared that story with someone else or spent time reflecting on it for yourself? What is the fruit of remembering and sharing?

4. Take a bit of time to recall one of your “God stories.” Try to remember the details as best you can. How did that change your life that day? How does it change your life today? What was God’s message to you in that encounter?

5. Do you know someone else who might need to hear that message? Tell them your story—remember the generosity of God, remember how close and present he is to you always!

Remember, Christ is your Emmanuel—*God with you!* □

Eden Jersak is married to Brad Jersak. She is the author of the devotional book, Rivers from Eden: Forty Days of Intimate Conversation with God.



CWRm

GREG ALBRECHT

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

“If God is love, why would he allow a place like hell?”

Q *If God is love, why would he allow a place like hell? For those people who reject God and go their own way, why can't they just die the first death and never come back? Why is there a need for a second punishable death? I think a lot of people are scared of God because he will punish ungodly people. Can you please explain?*

A Your first question is the telling question of course—allow me to restate it in the imperative. Since God is love, he does not allow for the place that humans often imagine and fear called “hell.” The hell of eternal, conscious torment is as far from the love of God as east is from west. The hell that has God participating in eternal torture by sending people there for never-ending torment is totally antithetical to all that we know of God.

Both cannot be right and true: 1) that God is love, and 2) that God will condemn anyone to eternal torture who rejects him.

“Hell,” of course, is a word that is used in the Bible—but it always has a specific meaning within a context, and it never implies that God uses it as a torture chamber.

Concerning your second thought/question—the people who reject God—why isn't the “first death” enough? Perhaps it is. The Bible speaks of a judgment, but again, like hell itself, judgment is not necessarily reduced to a future event that takes place after a person dies.

Judgment is not necessarily

something that God imposes, but it is the consequences he allows for and consents to—consequences humans bring upon themselves, through their own choices and behaviors.

Yes, you are absolutely correct—many people are terrified of a God of wrath, the God they believe is just waiting for the opportunity to “take them out” and “teach them a lesson.” That god is not the one, true God. That is the same “god” humans believed in long before Jesus—a pagan god who is angry, vengeful and delights in seeing people “get what’s coming to them.”

God has been and is horribly

misunderstood. When Christ-less religion continues to proclaim that misunderstanding, it causes enormous grief.

The one true God is all about inviting us to embrace his grace. God loves us because of who he is, rather than taking delight in punishing us for who we are or how we fall short and disappoint him!

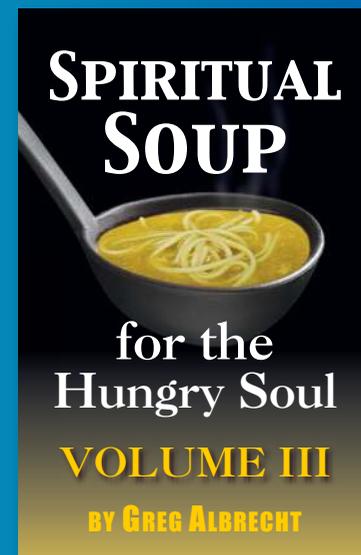
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CWRaudio *Summaries*

DECEMBER 2017

He Is The Light With Isaiah, we proclaim the wonderful news that "the people walking in darkness have seen a great light..." *Week of December 3*

Wrapping an Idea in a Person Jesus is the gift, the box, the wrapping paper and the bow on top. He is the whole enchilada—he is the gospel! *Week of December 10*

"To YOU and ALL the People" He came for us all—his love is for everyone. He has come, and is coming, "To YOU and ALL the People." *Week of December 17*

Have Yourself a Simple Little Christmas Joseph, Mary and Jesus celebrated the first Christmas without expensive gifts, ornate decorations and lavish meals—you can too! Who or what is the core of Christmas? *Week of December 24*

Forgetting What is Behind As we begin another New Year, we forget what is behind but we remember lessons learned. May we forget, yet not deny the past, and may we focus on Jesus, our hope and our goal, as we "strain toward what is ahead." *Week of December 31*

JANUARY 2018

We Believe Join us as we come to the Lord's Table, and as we discuss the essence of our faith and the central beliefs we hold near and dear. *Week of January 7*

God Loves Everyone God's love is astounding, for he loves everyone. His love is out-of-this-world—there is no other love like it! *Week of January 14*

"Living in Sin" The accusation that someone is "living in sin" is a phrase often used within religious circles to condemn another—but what does this accusation actually mean, in the light of the gospel? *Week of January 21*

Tear Down This Wall! Would you define the ministry of Jesus as one of building walls and barriers or tearing them down? *Week of January 28*