

Table Talk

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The Branch

by Glenn Palmer

The days are coming, says the Lord, when I shall bestow on Israel and Judah all the blessing I have promised them. In those days, at that time, I shall make a righteous branch spring from David's line.

Jeremiah 33.14-15a (REB)

One day while I was on internship about this time last December, out on the prairie in Northwest Minnesota, I was out wandering around, dropping in on, visiting, and sharing gallons of coffee (weak and tepid) with and eating mounds of cookies and bars with the farmers who had put their equipment up for the winter and whose fields were lying fallow, forlorn and forgotten for the time being.

To get to one of the farms that I was visiting that day meant driving, in my little Toyota, over old, rutty, frozen dirt roads past miles and miles of, and thousands and thousands of acres of sunflower fields that had been plowed over after the fall harvest, but that were still full of stalks, or the branches or roots if you will; protruding limp and lazy and lonely from the frozen prairie earth.

On the edge of one of these fields sat one of the three churches that my supervisor and I were serving; white and pure and clapboard, full of holy tales and ghosts. As I approached the church along this old dirt road I could see two large and luminous objects lumbering areound the churchyard driveway ... stark and black and obvious against the flat prairie sky.

I figured somebody must be out riding horses ... and then I said, "No ... not too many folks out riding horseback, in December, on the open prairie, in Northwest Minnesota.

Then I knew what they were ... they were the animal that the Chippewa Indians up in that part of the world tell legends of, the beast that the Micmac Indians where we're from in Maine mythologically call Pamola and that they say lives on a mountaintop called Katahdin, takes on human features, has hooved feet, and grows wings ... that bag of beastly beef and bones that look as though it ought to collapse into a heap at any moment and that reveals to us that God

does indeed have a sense of humor and that maybe ... just maybe, God does make some mistakes.

They were one of my favorite animals ... The Moose. Wandering and stumbling and bumbling and staggering around in the church court yard were a momma moose and a calf moose ... and I sat and watched them ... and I watched them as it started to grow darker and darker. Sitting there, in my warm car, on the edge of darkness, I watched them plod on away together, momma and child, from the churchyard and into the fields ... and I watched them eat ... and eat ... and eat.

Y'see, in the midst of a Northern Minnesota winter, which can mean darkness and death and hunger in so many ways ... for those Moose ... to eat on the branch, stalk, and root simply meant life ... it was to eat and receive life in the midst of death and darkness.

This past Sunday I gathered around the Lord's table with the seventeen or so members of a little country church I serve in the mountains of Maryland. These good folks have lost two of their own to cancer this yer, a girl aged 26 , and a fella about 58. Of this seventeen or so members, 12 to 13 of them have been and are wrestling with cancer at this time. The suffering , the death, the darkness that they have known and do now know just flattens me, yet they just keep plugging along.

As I shared in the Lord's Supper with these gentle and down, but not beaten, sinners this past Sunday, I asked myself where their strength comes from, where their hope comes from, and how is that they seem to take it all in stride?

And then I realized that for these folks ... like the Moose wandering around the prairie eating the sunflower roots, stalks and branches; that for these folks to eat and drink the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper ... to receive the full presence of the branch of David, the root of Jesse in Baptism and in the preached word, simply means life ... and so it is for all of us as we and all creation wait for and anticipate the birth of the Christ child ... as we wait and wander around in the midst of so much darkness and so much death we are simply fed the branch of David, the root of Jesse, the promised one, and we receive life itself ... and so it goes!

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Peace to you folks this advent season as you wait for the promised one ... life itself.

Then a branch will grow from the stock of Jesse, and shoot will spring from his roots. On him the spirit of the Lord will rest.
Isaiah 11.1-2a (REB)

GLENN PALMER is a Senior from New England Synod

Of Christmas Realities

by Walt Lichtenberger

Sitting intently, I listened to the voice of my beloved Grandpa recall a troubling Christmas reality. This reality was set in a past time when the world was ravaged by the 'civilized' nations' guns of war. The story went something like this:

It was 1944 (this is my guess as dates rarely made themselves into the oral tradition of my Grandpa) ... and a bunch of G.I.'s, my Grandpa included, attended Christmas eve services at a church in Germany. After the service, the servicemen (full of the Christmas spirit?) began to file out into the winter night. The silence of the night and of the season was quickly shattered by the sound of rifle fire. A sniper's bullet pierced the season's mood by embedding itself into one of the servicemen. To the sound of the sniper's fire the remaining G.I.s responded. My Grandpa and a group of comrades reacted by hastening to the origin of the shot. Quickly they raced up to the second story of a building across from the church in which they just worshipped. Crash! The door of the small room was violently knocked down. Using their issued handguns, my Grandpa and his buddies shot into the room, whence came the deadly sniper's bullet. Not only would the owner of the sniper's rifle -- the enemy -- ever see Christmas morning 1944, the one who pulled the trigger would not live beyond his teenage years.

This is the only war-time Christmas story that I can remember Grandpa telling me. Somehow, I find myself presently troubled by this past Christmas reality. I never physically experienced what occurred fifty years ago. What sense can one make of such a story? Why did my grandpa find it necessary to tell *this* tale to me? There were other stories which he explicitly withheld from me, but not this one. Adding to my questions is the vagueness which permeates this story: in what town did it happen; was the G.I. killed by the sniper; how many people stormed the upstairs room; from whose gun did the fatal bullet leave? So many questions to which I will never have an answer; this in itself troubles me for I miss the storyteller much. Can a word of peace and comfort be said to the reality of Christmas 1944, a Christmas which a young sniper would never see? Further,

can a word of peace and comfort be said to the reality of Christmas 1994, a Christmas which my beloved storyteller will never see?

To the reality of the war-torn past and the mournful present a message of Christmas is spoken; spoken by God Incarnate. For it is to the reality of our broken humanity, regardless of the age, that Christ has come. Reality is the whole point of Christmas! Not the reality of war and death but the reality of God's action on a still night in Bethlehem.

That God would become incarnate in a world besieged by sinful human realities creates a new kind of reality -- God's reality. But be warned! That God would become enfleshed and born in a stanky stable for the redemption of the entire world, is rather offensive. To think that God's reality would eventually consist of the blood of God's Son, who we now celebrate as lying in a manger, is not exactly the pretty picture we like to think of this time of year. Yet, it is God's reality.

And, it is God's reality alone that can offer us a word of peace and comfort this Christmas season. Only the reality of God's Incarnation can speak to the violent and upsetting realities which can plague us. Only the reality of God can speak to both sniper and target, to deceased storytellers, and to all those who have suffered losses this past year. God's reality speaks to us by saying that the reality of our sin, death, is not the ultimate reality. The ultimate reality belongs to God and we have experienced a foretaste of this final reality in a humble manger filled with straw and a single cross made out of wood. It is God's reality that we should celebrate each and every silent night, because it is to this reality that we have been joined in our baptisms.

May you experience the peace and comfort of God's reality this Christmas season, for it is this reality that Christmas is all about.

WALT LICHTENBERGER is a Middler from New Jersey Synod

Pentateuch Study Notes

by Richard Burgess

In preparing for mid terms a couple months ago, I developed a couple pages of study notes to help me keep my facts straight. It occurred some others might find them useful too. Here they are:

Names done in the Omega font are the "12" tribes of Israel, and names in the Rudelsberg font are the neighboring countries. Note the "12" tribes of Israel do not correspond to the 12 sons of Jacob. This can be easily explained: When Jacob won a duel with God at Peniel, he became Israel. The sons were pre-duel, and the tribes were post-duel. Later his son Joseph went to Egypt and came back as Manasseh & Ephraim. (The first documented case of multiple personality disorder.) During the Exodus Levi vanished into some kind of priestly la la land (what we're learning to do here at seminary). So we have 12 sons become 13 (the Joseph split above) and then 12 (the Levi loss). Note that Dan appears on the map twice. After settling down in Palestine Dan moved north to get away from the Philistines. A few years later Robert Schumann would even jump into the Rhine to get away from them. Apparently the Philistines weren't very good neighbors.

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Palestine Study Map

Names for God in the Pentateuch

Name	Translation	Explanation
Elohim	God	The generic name for God. Sort of the one God uses on Saturday morning while drinking coffee and reading the paper.
YHWH	LORD	God's legal name and is pronounced "YAW way", but hardly anyone uses it. Most people just say "LORD". Never say "Lord" as that's God's title, not God's name.
El Shaddai	God Almighty	Mountain God. The name God uses when hanging out with the other gods at Mt Olympus.
El Elyon	God Most High	The name Melchizedek gave God when God moved to Jerusalem.
El Olam	Eternal God	The name used for God in genealogies and at family reunions.
El Roi	The God Who Sees	The name used when God sees people who need help. When one of the grateful helped gives this name ("Elroy") to one of their children out of gratitude it is called a "thank offering".
El Berith	God of the Covenant	The "El" names used to belong to the Canaanite sky god. When El retired and moved to Sheol, El had a yard sale. God bought them there and made a deal ("covenant") to get exclusive rights to El's old names. In return, God promised to stay away from Sheol and leave El alone.

Psalm Resources

by Mary Amundson

Wonderful surprises hide themselves on the reserve shelf in the library, just waiting for the unsuspecting treasure hunter to discover them . . . I have been so fortunate!

This article is the first in series sponsored by the Worship Committee, so that you too may know of some of the wonderful treasures available for your use as you plan fun, spirit-filled, meaningful Chapel services.

Take the Psalms for instance. Our LBW offers us a fine collection, translated and marked for spoken or chanted use. But did you know we have five different additional resources available? And treasure they are. Two of these resources, *The Psalms: A New Translation for Prayer and Worship* and *Psalter for the Christian People* primarily offer new translations of all the Psalms. The Psalms... offers translations intended to be used for private prayer or worship. The translations remain poetic while using punctuation and contemporary language to vividly communicate the psalms message. This resource along with the Psalter for Christian People avoid gendered language for God. The Psalms... translations are not marked by verse, making it difficult to read the Psalms responsively. *The Psalter for Christian People* numbers the verses, and indicates with a "*" the half verse mark. *The Psalter* does not include the marks for chanting though. This was to make the resource as inclusive as possible. Traditions vary in how they chant the psalms. *The Psalter* includes an essay on how to mark to psalms for chanting depending on your tradition. If you wish to copy these psalms into your bulletin for Chapel worship you will need to obtain copyright permission to do so.

This step is not necessary if you use a third resource, *Psalms for Praise and Worship: A Complete Liturgical Psalter*. Permission to use these psalms texts for worship is given with the copyright information. And this is just the beginning of the treasures hidden in this book. Of the three text translations on reserve I favor this one. It offers a variety of reading styles for each Psalm.

MARY AMUNDSON is a Senior from Metro D.C. Synod



Not My Doing

by Dave von Schlichten

Nervous, yes, true, but not anymore. Not me.

Lying here in the dark, dead to the world, this is the life. It's not that I've got anything against the world. I haven't been to work in four days, but that's only because I haven't been feeling all that great. I've been spending a lot of time alone these past four days, and some people think that's a bad sign. Alone. Thirty-two and I don't have a wife. But that's okay. Thoreau went off and lived by himself for two years, and nobody accused him of being depressed or in denial.

In the darkness, there you feel free. It's been cold in my apartment, especially in bed, so I wrapped an extra blanket around me, and I'm fine. My room is lovely, dark and deep. There's nothing garish to focus on. Simplicity fills me. The dark is life-giving, and here no one gets hurt.

If I had a wife, she'd probably bug me about lying here in the dark, dead to the world, wrapped in a blanket. Actually, she wouldn't bug me about that, because I would not be doing it if she were around. Not that I need a wife, but if I had one, I probably would not lie around in the dark, dead to the world, wrapped in a blanket.

But I wouldn't appreciate her. I'd tell her, let's say her name is Lucy, I'd tell Lucy to leave me alone. I'd probably be that way to her, always telling her she's wrong when she's really right, always taking her for granted. Then she'd probably get her feelings hurt one time too many and go driving off somewhere and get into an accident or something. But the accident wouldn't be because she was too upset to drive or anything I did. It wouldn't be anyone's doing. No, it would just be an accident, a fluke, not my doing, one of those random things that happens in this dark world, right?

All this, of course, is made up. I don't have a wife named Lucy who wears little, gold, cross earrings. These are the kinds of thoughts I have while lying in the dark, dead to the world, wrapped in a blanket. I guess it's all a little strange, but don't we all think and do strange things? We all have some strangeness buried

inside, waiting to rise and haunt.

Someone's knocking loudly. I've never heard such pounding. The living room is between me and the front door of my apartment, but the knocking sounds like it's right next to me, even inside me. I click on the lamp (the one on my side of the bed), get up, and make my way in the dark through the dark living room and to the front door, the pounding sounding louder as I near it. My hand on the knob, I freeze because I'm spooked. What if it's a ghost from beyond the grave or some supernatural sight like that? I laugh at myself, because somehow I don't think creatures from beyond the grave would bother knocking. They wouldn't bother. I tighten the blanket around me.

"Sir, these are for you, please."

Staring at me is a girl probably about ten wearing white pajamas and slippers with big, fluffy lamb's heads on them, one on each slipper. She glances down the hall, her earrings catching the light and glinting as she turns her head. She holds up to me a paper plate with a brown doughnut on it and a paper cup filled with water.

"I brought you this food," she says loudly, as if she wants the entire floor to overhear. "This is my favorite snack for when I'm sad. I like water better than milk. I ate this when my cat died, and so I thought you could use it."

She places the plate and cup in my hands and looks down the hall again. "I snuck down here without my babysitter's permission. She told me not to bug you because you probably want to be alone, but I think she's wrong. Why are you all wrapped up in a blanket?"

"I'm not sure. Where are you from?"

She points up. "I live upstairs. My parents read about what happened to you in the paper. Do you want to be left alone?"

"Bethany! You're dead, kid!" A young woman of about twenty wearing jeans and a red sweatshirt comes storming down the hall toward the little girl. She takes the girl's hand. "You're going to get punished to death for this one! You never do what I expect of you."

I shake my cup at the woman, spilling a little on my hand. "No, don't," I say. "It's all my fault. Don't punish her. Everything's my fault." I don't know how it's my fault. I just know it is.

"No it's not," says the girl. "I came down here on my own. I figured I'd get in trouble, but I wanted to help." She says this loudly and frankly, as if she doesn't care who hears.

Some things are not my doing. Some things are other people's doing. And some things are no one's doing but are just accidents, right? Right.

Back in my apartment, I flick on a lamp in my living room, let my blanket drop off, sit down on the couch and drink the water and eat the doughnut, grape jelly flowing out as I bite.

Dave von Schlichten is a Middler from Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod

A German Christmas Story

How an Angel Visited Our House One Christmas Eve

by Stefan Munker

As I entered our house in the hills of the Allgäu, coming from the icy night that lay over the land, I immediately smelled the Christmas cookies. Before I went into the front room where I knew that mom was baking our favourite Zimtsterne, I put up my coat in the hall and went to the shop in the back where my father was working with my two elder brothers. They weaved baskets out of the branches we children had collected in the wood during summer.

"I got two Mark and fifty Groschen down at the store, and the medicine for the little one," I said giving the change and the bottle with cough sirup to my father. "That is all left, the stuff cost two mark. And Johann said he probably didn't need any more baskets till February."

"Thank you. But bring this to your mother so she can give it to Anna."

I knew that it was no good news. We needed the money for the baskets we sold at the general store down in town because with the snow we could not go to sell them in the neighbourhood. But my father did not make any comment about it. In those days I sometimes did not understand why he would act in this or that way, but I loved him and knew that he would do it right.

In the warm kitchen I met my two sisters helping mom to prepare supper. I pinched Evi's arm before I gave mom the medicine. We always were teasing each other, but I had very much respect for Helene since I once got my ears boxed from her in a fight. I then sat down at the big tiled stove and stroked Minzi our cat that usually lay there the whole day.

Two days before Christmas the snow now lay one and a half meter high and it looked as if there would be more on Christmas Eve. Advent was my favorite season with the white snow, cookies and presents under the Christmas tree.

After grace my father took the word and I saw from his face that he had something important to announce. "This year," he said, "the Christkind might not bring any presents because it might not get to our house through the snow." The eyes of us children were wide open and I even Anna in her cradle stopped coughing for a moment. "But your mom and I have told him that you were all good and . . ."

I did not hear what he further said. I simply could not believe that we would have a Christmas without the Christkind. As I lay awake in bed and listened to the breathing of my brothers and sisters beside me I prayed to the Lord Jesus that I did not want the hobby-horse I had asked for if only the Christkind could come to us.

At breakfast the next morning it was unusually quiet. Outside grey clouds were heavily releasing more and more snow on the earth. Today, I even did not have appetite for the ham and egg. My mood only got a little better when father asked me to assist him in bringing down the Krippe from the loft to set it up in the front room.

But the day passed by too slowly and the hope that the Christkind would come the next day was getting smaller every hour. In the afternoon father left with Thies, my eldest brother, to get a Christmas tree, as he usually did.

Everyone in the house was getting to be busy, but not with the joy as every year. I joined my brothers in weaving baskets and later helped mom to clean the floors. I hardly recognized when the both came back with the tree which stayed in the stable over night, for I was thinking of tomorrow evening again and my little prayer.

After supper, mom put hot water in a tub and we all took a bath in the kitchen. Then she brought us to bed, kissing everyone good night.

"Do you really think that the Christkind can't come to us, mom?" after I had said my prayer.

"I don't know, my dear. We'll see tomorrow," she said smilingly. "But now get to sleep."

But I could not sleep. If the Christkind came to everyone, as the pastor always

said, why could it not come to us? This night I had a dream in which our family stood silent around the Christmas tree in our front room and snow fell on us till everything disappeared in the whiteness.

The next morning, on Christmas Day, it had stopped snowing and the sun was glaring on the ice flowers at the kitchen window. Everyone helped decorating the tree and even Anna who seemed to recover slowly, put up one of the straw stars. The room smelled of fresh needles, cookies and hot tea. Finally, we sung some Christmas carols. It seemed that no one could flight from the magic of Christmas.

Then we had to get our best suits on and and I had to comb my hair. We hardly made our way down to church through the white fields, crossed the stream at the forrest and finally arrived at Neilwängle as the bells already rang the second time. So we hurried, but the little church was already filled with people and we had to stand during the entire service. I hardly understood anything of the sermon, but the pastor said something about a kingdom in our hearts and love of the Lord Jesus who came to earth.

After the service, our father met some people and talked with them, while I together with my brothers and sisters listened to the brass ensamble in front of the church. Before we got home it already began to darken, but the moon was shining bright this day. The whole nature seemed to be silent in reference to this special night. There were only our breathing and our steps in the snow to hear in the cold winter air.

When we came home, mom was already waiting with dinner ready and welcomed us with a "Merry Christmas!" for everyone, before we sat down around the table. I thought I saw some tears in her eyes but it could have been joy, too. We had a delicious meal with roast hare, dumplings, vegetables and baked apples for dessert. Our mother had saved most of it weeks in advance. Even Minzi got something from the table.

Mom and Dad then gathered us children around the Christmas tree where there were no presents this year, only some cookies, nuts and apples. But we sang Christmas carols, Thies read the Christinas story and father said that God had sent his son to the whole world. He prayed for blessing over our house and then everyone was allowed to take something from under the tree.

It was very quiet then in the house. Even my sisters playing with her dolls did not make much noise. Only father's rocker cracked on the wooden floor as he read, and from time to time Anna coughed in mother's arms. I had sat down at the stove, ate some cookies and watched Minzi playing with a paper ball.

Suddenly, we heard a loud knocking on the door in the hall. My heart stood still. Was it the Christkind? Everyone of us looked at father, but he just asked us to stay and went outside. We heard how he opened the door after a while and a short conversation, but I could not understand what was spoken. Then the door opened and father came in together with a stranger who carried a big pack with him. He asked us all to come closer.

As we stood in front of him, surprised and nosy, I asked Alois "Is this the Christkind?" I always had thought it was a girl with golden hair, dressed in white and with silver wings, like in the Christmas play at school.

"No," he whispered with a very serious expression on his face, "it is an angel."

Before I could argue that this one had no wings, the stranger explained that the Christkind could not come by itself but had asked him to bring our presents to us. Then he opened his pack and brought out all the things we had asked for. A new jacket for mom, a stuffed duck for little Anna, a pipe for dad, dresses for the dolls of my sisters, a knife for each of my brothers, several pullovers and for me a wooden hobby-horse.

Father asked us to say thank you to before he guided the angel back to the door. I was so glad that my prayer had been heard, after all, that I could not speak, just stood there with my horse. This night we stayed up very long showing each other the presents we got and sharing the joy of Christmas.

And I will never forget the Christmas Eve, an angel visited our house to bring us the presents from the Christkind, although I later found out that the angel was a farmer who lived another town away.

Notes:

Allgäu - hilly part of Southern Germany near the Alps where this story could have taken place.

Zimtsterne - cinnamon cookies in the shape of a star.

Mark and Groschen - German currency, 1 Mark = 100 Groschen (today: Pfennige).

Meter - metrical measurement, 1 meter = 1.094 yards.

Christkind - the Christ child, Christmassy figure bringing presents to the children.

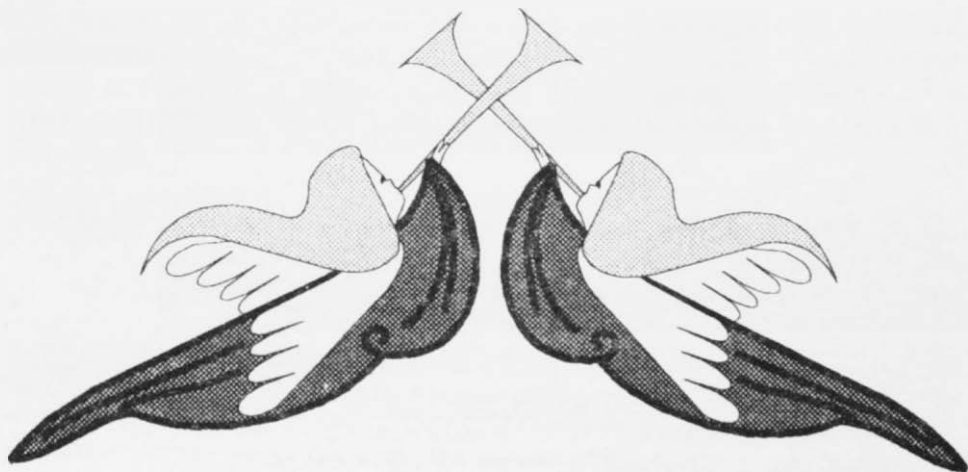
Krippe - crib, here: model of a native scene.

Neilwänge - Name of a fictional town.

Wishing you the blessing of an old fashioned Christmas!

1994 by Stefan Munker

STEFAN MUNKER is a senior M.A.R. student from Fürth, Germany.



Division for Lectures

by Tiffany Hall

The Division for Lectures looks forward to seeing you at our spring lectures. Things you can look forward to include lectures by faculty members sharing topics of interest, MA students sharing their Senior Theses, forums discussing issues facing the ELCA, and special interest lectures by a parish playwright, a lawyer speaking on AIDS, and former missionaries sharing their experiences. As always, your ideas are welcomed as we learn about different areas in our lives.

TIFFANY HALL is a Junior from Southeastern Minnesota Synod

The Womb

by Kurt D. Abrahamsen

Dreams are reality! Reality is a dream! Let us engage . . . for a brief moment in time . . . in a collective dream. Let us dream about the ocean! The ocean is the womb of the earth. Decillions of gallons of amniotic fluid. All of the living organisms that slither around upon this reprehensible planet were conceived and nurtured in the ocean. We are eternally indebted to the water for bestowing upon us the gift of life. The burden . . . of the human condition?! The proverbial . . . primordial soup is the true etiology of our existence.

The womb is warm. The womb is comfortable. The womb is dark. The womb is safe. We desire to return to the womb. We maintain an insatiable desire to return to that wonderful, safe, warm environment.

Returning to the ocean, ie, the womb of life, symbolizes our innate desire to return to the womb. When we are floating with the ocean, we are once again floating within the warm, wet, nurturing fluids of the amniotic sac . . . amniotic fluid . . . prebiotic soup . . . !

According to Freud, we must withdraw into a premundane state. We must withdraw into an existence not dissimilar to that of the womb. We must do this in order to maintain at least a slight semblance of sanity. "At any rate, we arrange conditions for ourselves very like what they were then: warm, dark, free from stimuli."

The return to the ocean is the return to the womb. The waves are soothing. Perhaps a ship contains us. The air is inundated with mist, and is salty on the lips and the tongue. The sun warms us from our eyelids, and scalp, to our souls.

Docking the ship and descending onto land is birth. Birth is pain. Birth is cold. Birth is hard. From the moment that we are excreted from the womb, we desire, and endeavor to return. From the moment that we set foot onto land, we desire to return . . . to the ocean, from whence we came. The womb . . . the fluid!

The womb, however is not without its teratogenic agents. At times, the waves become tsunami. Lorelei entices us. The blue sharks are forever on their prowl.

The predators seek their prey. The sea monsters . . . and the whales . . . and the parasites are all around . . . sucking the life from us. Has the head of Leviathan been sufficiently crushed?!

As we forge ahead . . . as we drift aimlessly . . . we must stay within the ship, the church . . . the community . . . the *EKKLESIA*, for continuity, and protection. Faith must be our anchor which holds us firm, and stable. The Fish, Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior -- *ICHTHUS* . . . our lord, our redeemer, rescues us from the sea monsters. The fish is ingested in our stead.

According to Tillich, "Religious symbols are distinguished from others by the fact that they are a representation of that which is unconditionally beyond the conceptual sphere, they point to the ultimate reality implied in the religious act, to what concerns us ultimately."

What does any of this mean? What does any of this mean to us as a Christian community . . . the gathering of the Christian community? What is the ultimate reality? What is it that ultimately concerns us?

Perhaps that it behooves us to secure ourselves firmly to the ship! One may recognize the fact that there are many various parts of the ship. There is the anchor, the bow and the stern, port and starboard, the helm and the tiller, the deck and the hull, the mast and the sail, the rigging, the transom, the charts, and the loran. All different, yet all vital, and of fundamental importance to the functioning of the ship. Diversity, not dissonance!

The possibility also exists that it is not actually the soothing waves of the ocean that provide contentment, but the ship, and the anchor which maintains our stability. Yes, there are the sharks, and the parasites that insatiably desire the taste of our flesh. Leviathan may indeed lurk just over the horizon . . . preparing to decapitate her prey. Yet, ultimately, there is the fish . . . Christ, the epitome of peace, love, and tranquility! *AGAPE* anthropomorphized! It is in fact Jesus the Christ, who in flesh suffered, and suffers the excruciating pain of the predators. Through this concept, we survive. Liberated from the bondage . . . from the shackles, we are able to take the helm. We are ready to set sail, with our anchor held high, and face the teratogen that we are sure to encounter.

Let us forge ahead, with our anchor held high, shimmering in the light of the sun. Let us endeavor to maintain our ship, and not neglect to throw out our life

rafts. Those who come aboard may experience the solace, and the peace, and the love . . . *AGAPE* . . . and perhaps even facilitate in maintaining our ship, and make it a stronger vessel !!!

Let us dream . . . !

KURT D. ABRAHAMSEN is a Middler from Metropolitan New York Synod

Heifer Project International

by Steve Jones & Bev Cotner

Heifer Project International began in 1944 and celebrates fifty years of helping hungry families help themselves. Heifer Project International is a non-profit Christian organization which works in partnership with thirteen denominations (including the ELCA). HPI provides 20 different kinds of food-and-income producing animals, as well as intensive training in animal husbandry; in ecologically sound, sustainable farming; and in community development.

As part of a project for Stewardship and Ecology class, Steve Jones and Bev Cotner are collecting funds to purchase animals and trees through HPI. Contributions will be accepted through February. For more information about how to contribute and animals available for purchase, please contact Steve or Bev.

STEVE JONES is a Senior from Delaware-Maryland Synod
BEV COTNER is a Senior from Delaware-Maryland Synod



Did You Hear What I Heard?

by Mary Amundson & Gumbo Young

On Wednesday evening, November 30th, forty-five members of our community gathered to talk to one another about God-Talk in Worship. The conversation began with reflections by four members of our faculty, one from each division. Did you hear what I heard?

This is what I heard!

I heard Frances Taylor Gench open our conversation with a quote from Brian Wren, suggesting that language, like tobacco, can be habit forming and can poison us and the air we breathe. She invited us to remember the many images our Scriptures uses to talk about God. Isaiah has many images of God as a mother. Not just a mother who carries her child in her womb, but also gives birth and nurses. We also have the image of God as a midwife. Frances pointed out some of the feminine images in our New Testament Scriptures. In Luke 15 we have two stories of how our God searches for the lost. The first is the image of the shepherd who leaves the 99 in search of the one. Right after that we get the story of the woman who searches for her lost coin. After each story, the heavens throw a party that one who has been lost has been found. Both of these images are in our tradition, but our imaginations have been captured more by the first than the second.

There are many more non-gendered images for God in our Scripture. The biblical writers used many images from nature to talk about our God, like: the Rock, the Eagle, the Bear, the Dwelling Place, Shield, Stronghold, and a favorite one for Lutherans comes from the Psalms, a Mighty Fortress. From this extensive list of images for God we realize that God is above, beyond and beneath all human words. Yet in our worship we have limited God to a few favorite images and have neglected many of the images our Scriptures offer. Frances suggested that it might be time for us to break open overused male metaphors and allow our Scriptures to move us to ever-expanding images for God.

Following Frances, I heard Duane Larson offer some systematic insights to help us consider not only appropriate images for God, but also to see God has chosen to reveal Godself. Duane suggested that some take the revelation of the

Trinitarian name "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" to be a "divine" name. But even with a revealed name, a name we consider transcendent, God is free of our use of that name. He pointed out that some anti-feminists would point to the Trinity as a proper name, and are uncompromising on any other claim. But, Duane suggested, to use the Trinity exclusively is almost anti-Semitic because it denies the theophany of God, when God revealed Godself as Yahweh. Duane agreed we need a name for God, so God can be personally accessible, so we have a name for the person on whom we rely. Yet the three-fold Trinity seems dissonant with the single name, Yahweh, revealed in Hebrew Scripture. So we need careful reflection.

God language focusing on Father- or Mother - misses the point that triune language is all about. Triune language seeks to express the personableness and the personalness of God. Whenever we speak of God in the singular, we speak of God unitarily. We see God as an immune, top-down, immutable substance which is somehow male. We have inherited Aristotle's exegesis of Plato that "a woman is an incomplete man." But God should be understood as community. God defies simple, monistic understandings of male and female. Persons are only authentic when they are in relationship. So in the triune name, relationship is first and gender is later. Any images we use for God should be under the norm that we live under community first. The question becomes, "What is normative about the triune name?" Answer: we have a God who is in community, and wants us to be in community, now. Any other ways of understanding the ways of God are delusory. The point of God as Father is the personableness of God.

After Duane, I heard Mark Oldenburg, our illustrious chaplain, speak. He reminded us that any conversation about language of God should be approached with humility. This is because any language we use will be wrong, misunderstood, and imperfect (if it's perfect, then we have a graven image. Each speaker emphasized this point). Any symbol we use has to be broken and admit its own imperfection. But, we have the promise that broken language will be enough, not perfect, but the finite will contain the infinite. So, we are in search of a way to talk about God imperfectly but in the best way we can.

Mark stated two assumptions. Assumption #1: We should be using non-masculine images more and more. We are still growing into the Bible. Assumption #2: Don't use the third person pronoun, neither HE nor SHE! "He" means male in our language today; it is not gender-neutral. In addition, "He" is dangerous because it appears to be an unbroken, perfect symbol. Even saying this, we recognize that using the male pronoun to refer to God may be

unavoidable, because that's what we grew up learning to do.

Mark gave three limitations. Limitation #1: The community is in some way bound to the LBW as a resource of the church. We have a commitment to be familiar with this resource and therefore we can't throw it out. Limitation #2: We live in a number of different communities. We live in an ecumenical community. Therefore, we should not make changes by ourselves, no matter how bad it becomes. We don't have to. Others are also working on this issue. We not only have the creed but many prayers in common in this ecumenical community and we should make changes to them together. Limitation #3: Out texts speak to us more deeply than our reason. That makes it dangerous to change. It also makes change an act of violence. For example, if our favorite hymn text is not changed with care, singing it will be like having our guts ripped out. There are good ways to change texts. Look at the Presbyterian Hymnal.

Then Mark had two requests. Request #1: Be generous with one another. We're all on the same team. So don't assume that the person disagreeing with you is a Fascist or a pagan. Request #2: Be honest with one another. If we're on the same team we should be able to tell someone if something they did hurt us.

Mark's end note was about the third person pronoun. It's not polite to talk about someone in the third person when they are sitting next to you. Therefore, should we really be referring to God in the third person?

Last of the presenters Norma Wood talked about the relationship between Self-Image and God-Talk. She said that when working with folks who have low self-esteem she considers four points: 1) Experience: What have been this person's formative relationships with significant others. The way we picture ourselves is tied up with how we have been nurtured, neglected, valued or abused. 2) Models: Who have been the models during a person's formative experience? Who's held up as the ideal? Our self-image is shaped in relation to our models, and we measure ourselves in relation to our models. 3) Our own Self-Talk: We have patterns for talking to ourselves, ways in which we say, "This is who I am" (stupid, ugly, gifted, etc). These patterns filter out input from others that don't fit our self-talk and allow in what we believe is true about ourselves. 4) Cultural Framework: The cultures and symbols of our culture affect and shape us. Often though, they are so much like the air we breathe, we don't really notice the effect they have.

After considering these four points, Norma said that it would be nice if we had

a scientific study with results showing the affect of God-Talk on Self-Esteem. We don't. Instead we have many anecdotal stories and experiences, and we can learn important things from these. One of the testimonial streams comes from adult survivors of child abuse. They have difficulty with the image of God as Father. They say loudly that masculine language for God blocks their relationship with God. They seek and rejoice when other language is used, and they want more of those opportunities. These clinical stories are the most dramatic. But, our community also experiences some exclusion as well as inclusion as we worship together. Members of our community have feelings of anxiety and discomfort with our worship. It would be good for us, Norma said, to listen to people's stories, because worship affects the way we think about and imagine God.

Our models in worship have been limited. If we need models to go through the process of Christian maturation, then the models in our community experience should be good. We need to look at the models we put in front of one another. Our patriarchal culture here frames and influences what it means to be male and female. Referring to God only in the masculine only underscores a culture that views maleness as humanity and femaleness as other. Males tend to identify with God as Father, and in so doing, can blur the boundaries between the reality and the symbol, and can then overestimate themselves. Just the opposite is true for women, who can feel second-rate and underestimate themselves. In addition, because our experiences with others establish patterns, the model of God as Father may mean women grow up as "Daddy's little girl" and therefore don't have a model for Christian maturation.

Finally, Norma raised the issue of power. Who in our community gets to name God? Who tells us how we can think of God? Who has the authority, the power, regarding this issue?

These were the comments presented by faculty members. Everyone present was invited to enter the conversation by sharing their experiences, hopes, fears, pain or suggestions regarding God-Talk in our community worship. It was emphasized that this forum opened the conversation which will continue next semester. No conclusions were reached by the end of the evening, no decisions were made. The point of the time together was to listen and share, to have a conversation.

This is some of what I heard.....

The first question was "Father is the name Jesus gave to God. If Jesus calls God

Father, what's wrong about us calling God Father? It's God's name!"

Duane Larson responded by saying, "Referring to God as Father says many things. It communicates the "unoriginate origin" of the first person of the Trinity. It shows on whom Jesus was absolutely dependent, but it also strongly expresses the personalness of God. Certainly we ought to refer to the Trinity in our worship at least once because we understand that as normative. But we also use other names for God. Names that are Biblically faithful, but also reflect sensitive communal and personal address.

We should ask, "What language best proclaims the Gospel?" Context makes a big difference. We need to be careful about gender to draw the line between who feels included and excluded by masculine language for God. Some women don't feel excluded by masculine language, and not all men feel included by it. How can our language remain Christocentric?

We have been allowed by Jesus to call God a parent, and we don't want to lose that precious gift. Some of our talk of God makes God very alien.

Sometimes language can be uncomfortable, but not offensive. Talking about God as "she" is uncomfortable, but also good. It opens up ways of understanding God in new ways that haven't been imagined before.

The last thing I heard was Norma Wood's words: "We will never get it right. There really can be no right way to speak of God."

The comments above are not exhaustive of what was said, but hopefully representative. And the conversation is not over. The Worship Committee hopes to have another forum in the Spring. We would appreciate any suggestions you have about how to structure that.

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