

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Comfort and Joy



LIFELINES

by Rev. Dr. Gerhard Michael Jr.
President, Florida-Georgia District

For some strange reason, this Advent season I have had the line, "O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy; O tidings of comfort and joy," running through my head. As you probably recognize, the line comes from the English Christmas carol, "God rest ye merry, gentlemen."

In our American run-up to Christmas, doesn't this seem like an unusual combination? Don't we like to think of Christmas as a happy time, a time for fun and light-hearted festivities?

I'd like to suggest that a careful look at several Old Testament Advent texts from Isaiah can help us grasp how the combining of these quite different nouns is not a mistake. In fact, the English carol can actually help us celebrate Christmas in a deeper and fuller way through this strange combination. Let me share how I think this to be so.



Probably the most familiar Advent text that utilizes the word,

"comfort," is Isaiah 40:1, where God instructs his prophet, "Comfort, comfort my people." The repetition of the command heightens its urgency. Israel languishes in exile in Babylon, her homeland a deserted wasteland, the result of her disobedience and waywardness.

God instructs his prophet to comfort his covenant people, to speak tenderly to her, crying that "her warfare is ended, her iniquity is pardoned, she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." (Is. 40:2)

"Comfort, comfort my people." (Isaiah 40:1) God instructs his prophet to comfort his covenant people ... because there is forgiveness for her sins. Because God pardons his people's iniquity, the guilt is gone. God is not against his people, but is their savior and friend. He is not the enemy. God is reconciled.

When the word "comfort" is united with joy, it sounds like the Christmas story is addressing heavy things, things that make one sad. The combination of "comfort and joy" makes it sound like the tidings of Jesus' birth are taking us in two quite different directions. Can this be right?

The prophet is to comfort his people, because there is forgiveness for her sins. Because God pardons his people's iniquity, the guilt is gone. God is not against his people, but is their savior and friend. He is not the enemy. God is reconciled.

To make the connection between Christmas and Isaiah

40, I should point out that all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) link this section of Scripture with Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist. This

were gone astray." As we know, going astray means we are sinners. Christ's birth spells comfort through forgiveness, which results in joy.

The New Testament's "sending" and "came" passages reflect the Christmas story and why God's Son was born — to bring comfort to us through the forgiveness of sins ... The connection between forgiveness and joy should be clear. Release from sin's guilt results in joy.

text also provides the inspiration for several Advent hymns in our Lutheran hymnbooks.



The reason for Christmas is, of course, God's love. He sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:17) Paul said it this way, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." (I Tim. 1:15) Jesus himself said, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28) The New Testament's "sending" and "came" passages reflect the Christmas story and why God's Son was born — to bring comfort to us through the forgiveness of sins. In effect, they re-enforce what the angel told Joseph when he was instructed to name Mary's baby "Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21)

The connection between forgiveness and joy should be clear. Release from sin's guilt results in joy. When the Ethiopian eunuch got baptized — that is, he got united with Jesus Christ and was made the recipient of his saving work — the Scripture tells us, "he went on his way rejoicing." (Acts 8:39)

The Prophet Isaiah ties comfort and joy together in Isaiah 52:9: Break forth together into singing, You wastelands of Jerusalem; For the LORD has comforted his people, He has redeemed Jerusalem. The previous chapter links the two together as well: The Lord will surely comfort Zion. And will look with compassion on all her ruins; He will make her deserts like Eden, Her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her; Thanksgiving and the sound of singing. (51:3)



The English Christmas carol provides the basis for "comfort leading to joy." As the caroler sings, "God rest ye merry" — that is to make their hearts merry, joyful, full of gladness — the gentlemen to whom the caroler sings should "remember, Christ our Savior, was born on Christmas Day; to save us all from Satan's power, When we

will not forgive you, and if that is the case, then know in your heart of hearts, that ultimately it does not matter, for you have forgiveness where it eternally counts. Let your comfort rest in the forgiveness which Christ has won for you. You can be of good cheer. Your restored relationship with Christ will help you bear the burden of the strained human relationship.

To think that God would have his Son become a man — the miracle of Christmas — that we might be restored to him, isn't that comforting — and a source of joy no negative circumstances can destroy?

Comfort from the Lord is such that fear must exit and confident joy make its entrance: I, I am he that comforts you; Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, Of the son of man who is like grass? (Isaiah 51:12)

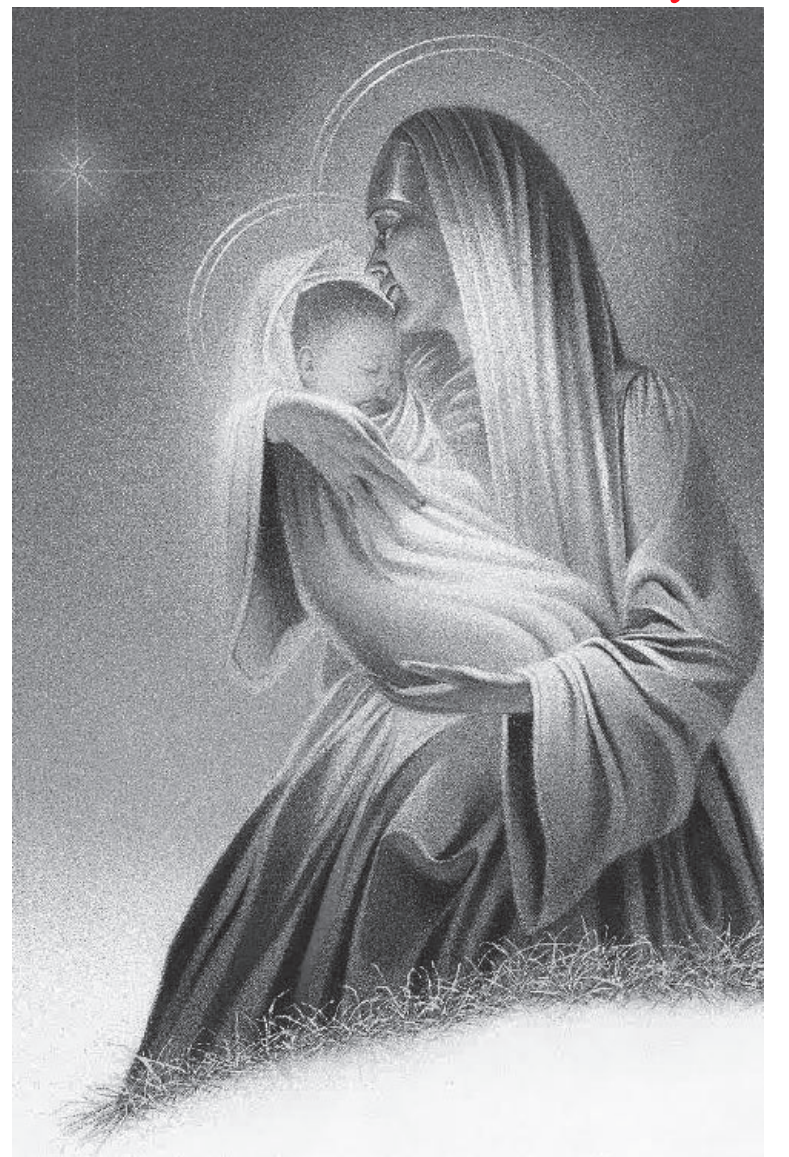
Isn't that a wonderful way to celebrate Christmas and enter

Would you have a deeply joyful Christmas? Then I'd like to suggest that you see the things which sadden you—the broken relationships; the partly completed responsibilities; the failed promises; the grief that death brings—are all the result of sin, but recognize beyond a shadow of a doubt that they have all been overcome through the forgiveness Christ has brought.

If there's a sin that is bothering you, then in the strength of Christ's forgiving love confess it to God and go to the person you have hurt or wronged and seek his or her forgiveness. It may be that he or she will forgive you, and then you will experience the joy that comes from reconciliation. But it may be that he or she

the new year soon before us — singing of the Savior's birth, "O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy; O tidings of comfort and joy?" May each of you experience a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, with joy inspired by the comfort of the Savior's forgiving grace.

-gcm





LUTHERAN LIFE
VOL. 28, NO. 10 • DECEMBER 2005

Lutheran LIFE is the official newspaper of the Florida-Georgia District/Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Lutheran LIFE is designed to inform LCMS church and school members of the activities, the personalities and resources offered by the Synod and the District. Lutheran LIFE may also provide a forum for Lutherans to express their views and ideas on a wide range of topics. We welcome and encourage editorials, emphasizing that the views and opinions expressed are not necessarily shared by the editors or District or Synod personnel. Lutheran LIFE is published monthly, with occasional combined bimonthly issues. Editorials, press releases and photos are encouraged and must be received at Lutheran LIFE publication offices no later than the 10th of the month prior to the publication date. While we make every attempt to use submitted information in the next issue of LIFE, space considerations prevent us from guaranteeing that stories will be used immediately. Advertising is welcome; information is available from our production office. Changes of address or new subscriber information should be directed to our production office as well.

<p>District President Rev. Dr. Gerhard Michael Jr.</p> <p>Florida-Georgia District Office: Lutheran Ministries Center 7207 Monetary Drive Orlando, Florida 32809-5724 Telephone: (407) 857-5556 FAX: (407) 857-5665 www.flga-lcms.org</p> <p>Lutheran Life Editorial & Publishing Office: 75 SE Third Street Boca Raton, Florida 33432 Telephone: (561) 417-5605 FAX: (561) 417-5606 e-mail: LutheranLife@aol.com</p>	<p>Publisher, Executive Editor and District Public Relations Director John List</p> <p>Editor-in-Chief Eileen Bishop</p> <p>Art Director & Layout Coordinator Chris Utech</p> <p><i>Serving, Assisting, Encouraging Congregations in Ministry</i></p>
---	---