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Dear Brother:

For many years I have written a Christmas letter to one of my sons. I am sending one to you this year in the hope that it may help you in your meditations for the Children's Service on Christmas Eve.

It was written more than twenty years ago:

"Dear Son:

This year you are still too young to know much about Christmas, both what God wanted it to be, and what we have made it . . . You will look open-eyed at the lights, and you will rock quietly as you hear sweeter music than you have ever heard before . . . I am sure, too, that you will wonder, as little children everywhere have always wondered, at the strange beauty of Christmas . . . the happy people, seemingly so much happier than they are at any other time . . . the music, the carols, the lights in every window throwing a warm promise on the snow . . . I think that I should like to tell you something about it . . . Tonight the wind is high and cold around the house and the first snow of the new winter is driving against the window at my side . . . The hour is late, perhaps later than I think . . . A little while ago I carried you up to bed, and your head was heavy with sleep on my shoulder . . . It seems to be a good time to write you a note about Christmas . . .

It happened long ago . . . Sixty generations of little boys have been born, have lived, and have died since the night when Christmas began . . . It was in a little town on the other side of the world, in the reign of the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus when all the world was uneasily at peace, and in far-off Rome the gates of the Temple of Janus were closed . . . What happened in that little town of Bethlehem was really nothing very much, the way we see things now . . . A baby was born . . . If there was anything unusual about it, it was only that there was no warm cradle for Him, and His mother had to put Him in a manger from which animals ate their straw . . . They were very courteous, though, and stood aside and looked wonderingly at the strange sight—a baby lying on their straw . . . He looked so small and helpless that I am sure they were glad to have Him there . . . His mother had tried to get a place in the inn not far away from the stable, but there was no more room . . . And so the oxen and the sheep were really the first to do what some of us are still doing today, standing around the manger, wondering at what was going on, and glad that He came to bring some light into our long winter night . . .

Outside the stable, too, things were about as they always had been . . . Around the hills and pastures there was a great stillness and silence . . . Most of the people had gone to bed . . . On the uplands beyond the town there were a few shepherds, who had to stay awake most of the night, watching their sheep . . . They sat by their thornbush fire, talked of this and that and watched the faint light dimly showing from the stable in the town . . . Perhaps I should say here that it is a good thing that the story includes some sheep . . . They are helpless creatures, preyed upon by jackals, always ready to run away or to get themselves entangled in thornbushes, contrary, and silly . . . They need a shepherd to keep an eye on them even when they are sleeping . . . That is why the little Baby, when He had grown up to be a man, said something about being the Good Shepherd of all of us . . .

There they were, the sheep, the shepherds, the fire, and all around them the deep blue of the winter night . . . Now something strange and wonderful happened . . . To the shepherds, alone in the vast and lonely silence of the night, there suddenly appeared from the sky, unannounced and unh heralded, the angel of the Lord, and about the angel and the shepherds there shown the brightness of God . . . We can hardly imagine what that was like . . . Someday we shall know just how bright and how lovely the light of God is, better than all our candles and lights, brighter than the sun, whiter than the stars on Christmas Eve . . . The shepherds saw something which only a few people on earth had ever seen.
before, and you can understand that they were really frightened... They rose to their feet, the sheep began to bleat, and the whole hill was astir with the life of heaven... But they did not try to run away as we so often do when God comes to us... They were no cowards... They just stood there, trembling and bewildered, and the Glory of the Lord covered their shabbiness and dressed them with light as if it were a garment... And so the Angel, seeing their fear, did what God had told him to do... He spoke to them, and what he said was so wonderful that you should remember it always: "Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ, the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger..."... And then, just to make sure that they would not think that this was only one angel who had come all alone, there suddenly was with him a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." the only song they know... Then the angels went away, the glory faded from the sky, and the shepherds were once more alone with their sheep, swallowed up in the great and lonely silence of the night...

Well, what do you think the shepherds did?... They did just what you and I would do if somebody came rushing into the house to tell us that something great and wonderful had happened over on Main Street... We would put on our coats and mittens and go to see what it was all about... You see, when God comes to tell us something, the only thing you can do is to believe it... There is no sense in arguing about it, or wondering if it was a dream, or reading books to see if it agrees with what wise men have said, or worrying about your sheep, or staying home to tend the fire... Many people still do that when God comes to tell them about the Baby born in Bethlehem, and so they always miss the good and great part of the story... They never get to the manger... The shepherds knew better than that... They banked their fires, took their staffs, called to their sheep, and started down the hill to Bethlehem... What a procession that was! First the shepherds, silently feeling their way through the dark night, guided only by the stars and the dim flicker of lights in the little town, and after the shepherds, patterning on the ground, the march of sheep as they followed their guardians into the city of David... And so they finally came to the place where the Child was, the silence of the night broken by the beat of little hoofs on the village street, and the Baby waiting for them as He had waited since the beginning of the world... They came to the stable, and the sheep crowded in with the shepherds, because it was a little warmer inside... And now comes the strangest part of the story... With the oxen looking on in wonder, the sheep milling around, the Baby's mother sitting worn and still, the stars singing for joy, and the world in breathless midnight, the shepherds knelt on the earthen floor of the stable and worshiped their God and Lord, the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, very God of very God, Light of Light, the Alpha and Omega, the eternal Word made flesh...

Perhaps you do not understand these last words... They are not easy to understand... To tell the truth, Christmas does not come to be understood... All I know—and I know it as I know nothing else in the world—is that the Baby in the manger was really the Son of God, who had come so far down from the place where the angels live, to lie on a bed of straw and to exchange the chant of cherubim and seraphim for the bleating of the sheep and our crying in the night... And all we can do now is to give ourselves, tenderly and ever so gently, to the Child, because He is the Lamb of God, who once was cradled in a manger but is now the King of Kings and the Lord of little children everywhere...

That's the story of Christmas.

Dad.

Retraction: A note from St. Louis, apparently written by one of the inhabitants of 210 North Broadway, reads as follows:

"I saw that in one of your recent yellow sheets you referred to Dr. Pfotenhauer’s statement that there was too much traveling in Synod. You inferred also that we, too, at 210 are bitten by the travel bug. Have you lost all your remaining marbles? Do you actually believe this? Do you really believe that on a given afternoon at three o’clock some of us hop a plane to Seattle or New York rather than go home, take off our shoes, haul a can of Falstaff from the ice box and retire to the back porch to read the latest copy of the Un-Lutheran News? Do you really believe that? You should know that we leave the comforts of our homes only when we absolutely have to. Even if there is nothing good to read, there is always the reassuring voice of the cuckoo in the sumac by the fence. No, believe me, we travel only when we absolutely must. Next week, for example, I must head for the ‘Upper Nile Eintrags Konferenz’ to lead a discussion of ‘Schwager-Ehe’ and of ‘Wucher.’ The boys in the Upper Nile region suspect that there is something wrong somewhere. They have heard that one of our own Seminary professors has said something nice about his sister-in-law... and so I have to go. Of course, in this case the answer will be comparatively easy; the brother at the Seminary has no sister-in-law. He was talking about his mother-in-law. I retracted what I said.

Dad.
VU News and Views: Total undergraduate enrollment 3509. . . . Graduate students 184. . . . Voice from the rear: How do you take care of all those kids, even if you have beds for them? Answer: By beginning at 7:30 a.m. and running well into the evening hours and on Saturdays. We will not be a streetcar college.

Our slipping so quietly into a good graduate program is due to a number of first-rate men: Huegli, Tuttle, Mundinger, Meyer, Friedrich, Bauer, Seegers. The program will be expanded this year.

Tuition goes up fifty dollars a semester in the fall. This always hurts. If we only had more endowment! Even with this increase, we are still below the average for private schools. Fortunately, more help for the student is available than ever before—and it will increase.

Hardest job these days: Getting and keeping well-qualified teachers. Moral: If you know of anyone who might be willing and ready to come to Valpo, please drop us a line.

Happy note: The New Morality has so far (fingers crossed) left us comparatively untouched. Now and then we have been aware of its dirty edges—but our students generally come from good homes—and that tells part of the story.

Gratitude: Now and then a card from a brother arrives: “This week my people are praying especially for Valpo.” I usually convey this to leading students and you might be startled by the effect this news has. After all, it’s pretty hard to go out and raise hell all over the place when you know that at that very moment somebody in Minnesota, California or New York is praying for you. You must be a pretty hardened rat to ignore that. Intercessory prayer helps—in heaven and on earth.

Confession: I have fallen prey lately—more than ever before—to the sin of pride. Solemn, serious, scholarly men known as the “Concordia Historical Institute” have asked me for a complete file of these yellow sheets for their archives. I must admit that my pride has been somewhat tempered by the fact that they also asked for all parish papers, district supplements, back copies of the “Rundschau” and the “Abend-Schule,” “News and Views,” and the “Confused Lutheran.” A truly ecumenical outlook.

And yet I consider this a major breakthrough into posterity. It is now possible for a Th.D. candidate in 2165 to write his thesis on “Yellow Sheets: Notes from the Infancy and Adolescence of the Former Missouri Synod.”

I can even envision some of the chapter headings: “Dead Head Scrolls Discovered in Basement”—“Forgotten Writer Reflects Twentieth Century Confusion”—“Theophilus: A Study in Embryonic Heresy and Primitive Paranoia”—“Description of Primitive Convention: A Thousand Men Convene to do the Work of One Computer”—“Separated Brethren from Mars, Venus and Rome Unknown”—“Earliest Trace of Problems of Hermeneutics: Obsolete Word Requiring Further Study: Dialogue, Ecumenicity, Synod (apparently a planet surrounded by satellites moving in the opposite direction), Budget Drive, Board of Directors (absolutely obsolete), Microphone (apparently a primitive forerunner of our built-in electronic devices)—and so forth.

I am particularly pleased with imagining the prospect of the following note in the dissertation: “These Dead Head Scrolls were written by an unknown pedant by the name of Kretzmann—or Kretzschmar (there are variant readings of the name). A study of the archives reveals the fact that the last character of this name was a janitor at Holy Cross Church In a city known as St. Lois—or Ludwig or Ludovici. He apparently died when he fell out of his helicopter on the way home from work after too many swigs of communion wine. This was in 2136. There are a few other records of the name—mostly in polemical literature. . . .

Hermeneutical Footnote: Have you noticed the desperate attention modern writers paid the world’s need for pure, drinkable water during the past few years? Thousands of newspaper stories and hundreds of magazine articles have been devoted to the subject. We need more water—good, clean water. It is our greatest need. To meet it we are building gigantic dams, diverting the course of great rivers and working desperately on the desalinization of the sea. Here in America, Lake Erie is already a vast cesspool, our rivers are open sewers and in our lakes and ponds little fish die for lack of air.

As I read some of these things I suddenly remembered that I had seen a reflection of this need for water in the Scriptures a long time ago. Hundreds of times the sacred writers refer to water, the still waters, the living waters, the quiet waters, counsel like deep waters, of casting bread upon far waters, a cup of cold water, the water of Life—and so forth.

Now to our learned hermeneuticians all this is perfectly understandable. Our ancestors in God were always in a dry land, face to face with the Negev, waiting for the rainy season when the Jordan would run high and the Kidron would flow full between its rugged banks. They had only to look around in their little land to see the ever-present tragic need for water.
Now I would like to add another hermeneutical note. In addition to expressing their own sense of immediate need, our sacred writers were reflecting a cosmic, universal need. The world needs water. Humanity—all of it—requires water. As a consequence, many passages formerly localized in their background by our limited scholarship now take on a new and unusual significance. The city dweller in New York or the farmer in South Dakota now can understand more readily what the sacred writers mean by ‘still waters’ or ‘waters of life.’ Here is something global and cosmic. Even the surface of the moon, we discovered a few months ago, is dead because it has no water. All the Scripture passages about water begin to glow and surge with a new universal meaning. We have come a little nearer to God’s view of the universe.

In all my born days no one has ever accused me of being a theologian—much less a good one. It is therefore possible for me to present my own hermeneutics without any fear of landing in the pages of the CTM. Of course, they are not the end result of many years of hard study; they are only the conclusions of an observer who stands by the Way, watching the parade of theologians to the Throne of Grace—asking and finding—forgiveness. So I shall now present the hermeneutics of such an observer and my son Stephen, age 12.

1. The Bible is the Word of God speaking in words, in history, in life itself—always directly and unerringly to the hearts of men.

2. What the Book tells about is always directly and unerringly Jesus Christ—Lord and Savior and King—Desire of Nations, Alpha and Omega. This I learned from Luther.

3. Some parts of the Book seem to speak of Him more directly than others. This is probably due to the fact that I have let the Spirit of God get too far ahead of me, and I have lost the clarity of His voice somewhere along the way. This means that I must listen again just as the first man whom He addressed, listened. For example, when he speaks to Samuel, I must put myself in Samuel’s house, listen with Samuel’s ears, and obey with Samuel’s heart. My ears must be sharpened only by what my hidden God has been saying these thousands of years. For me to try to intrude on the conversation between the Holy Spirit and Samuel only as a twentieth century third-cousin of Samuel is the ultimate arrogance; and to read into the Word things at which Samuel would have rubbed his sleepy eyes in nonsense. The avoidance of this arrogance is, by the way, the ultimate purpose of all honest Biblical study. Here theologians go wrong in two ways. Either they hear more than Samuel heard or less than Samuel heard. The first group become hard, rigid, opinionated super-orthodox men—the others become shoddy, shallow, partially deaf humanists. In both cases they become rationalists—continuous static on the wave length of the Holy Spirit.

4. In our study of the Book we will probably never solve the mystery of the relationship of the human to the divine in the writing of it. The very same Holy Spirit was talking in the prison cell at Rome and on the island of Patmos. For the time being—until the last lesson in Hermeneutics at the Golden Gates—this is all I know—and all I need to know. Stephen agrees.

After-thought: I sometimes wonder if this will not be our destiny in the years that lie immediately before us. As we advance into the hidden corners of science, as we explore the secrets of space, as we learn more about our own being, is it not possible that our understanding of certain passages of Scripture will assume new dimensions of depth and grandeur, the heights and depths of the hidden God, a vision of the ultimate truth of history as God has always seen it? If I had money enough, I would place a team of theologians at the elbows of Francis Schmitt of MIT, Oppenheimer at Princeton, Urey of Cal Tech and tell them to report everything they know, hear and see in terms of John 1. Are you smiling? What is so stupid about this? Our children will have to do it.

Special Christmas Note to Mrs. Theophilus—

If I remember my parsonage childhood accurately, Mother did not get to the children’s service very often. If she did, one of us was seated on her arm and another was hanging on to her skirts (in those days even a very little boy could do that) howling because he knew that after the service he would be kissed by Grandma Himmelhoch, Deacon Sauerbraten, and other characters whose breath indicated that they had already begun to celebrate Christmas. Some of these the skirt-hanger did not mind so much because they offered him gifts; but Sauerbraten never came through with more than a nickel. The coming evening looked dismal...

Despite all this, I hope that you will be able to go to the children’s service. Here is the future—so much of it still in your hands. I know that the church is full of legends about P. K.’s who have not turned out well. This is only a part of the truth; the greater part of it is that these howling, drooling P. K.’s have made a greater contribution to the world and the Church than any other comparable group. Your own skirt-hanger may well be one of the great in the Kingdom—because you taught him to remain a little child. Despite dishes and dinners you are still a shepherdess with a very special and very gracious mission, standing at times in the shadows of history but always in the sunlight of God’s all-seeing grace.
So—please forget about the Christmas Day dinner. It can be late. The kids will already be half-sick from eating candy and your husband deserves a nap after the morning's work. Go to church on Christmas Eve and know again that your God was pleased to be born just as the child on your arm and that He, the little Holy One, looks at your life with a special kind of compassion and joy. Your Christmas may not be merry but it will be happy.

I gave the above to Theophilus a few weeks ago and he promptly showed it to Mrs. Theophilus. As might have been expected, this is what I got back—and quickly:

"Your special Christmas note to me demonstrated again that you were a bachelor too long. Me not go to the children's service? Listen! I turn up the heat in the cold church, take off dozens of boots and rubber, give Johnny Himmelhoch a couple of Tums for his annual Christmas stomach ache, direct the choir, act as prompter for the recitations, try to keep Elsie (our daughter) quiet, put on dozens of boots and rubber, tell Grandma Himmelhoch that she is looking fine without her gall-bladder. Me, not go to the children's service? The only things I don't do are preach and take up the collection. Father and Sauerbraten, respectively, do that—but even here I am directly involved.

Three of the primary kids always drop their nickels just as Sauerbraten approaches—a case of pure fright. I have to retrieve the rolling coins."

Answer: "O. K., Mrs. Theophilus, but don't forget that the Holy Child will smile to see you on your knees seeking and finding a gift for Him. He, with His almighty understanding, will love you for it."

Dictionary of Obsolescence: You may vaguely remember that in the last issue of these yellow sheets I began to talk about words which have now outlived their usefulness. Here are two more.

Existential: It really never was a good, clean, honest word. It was applied to such diverse characters as Buber, Bonhoefer, Sartre and Kierkegaard. I must confess that every time I thought I had the word trapped, it turned up somewhere else. I also discovered that everybody is a partial existentialist; and that nobody is a complete existentialist. The word must now be assigned to the ash heap because it has lost all specific meaning. Let Sartre have it!

Secularism: This is one that I really hate to give up. It could always be used in a sermon to cover everything I did not like. With the coming of a "holy secularism" and the ever-growing involvement of the Church in the life of the world, the word is obsolete. It may return one day but not very soon. First it must be cleaned up.

Another letter written to Mark many years ago:

Dear Son:

What, after all, is Christmas? . . . What came into the world on Christmas night? . . . A few reminders

PEACE

Perhaps the first sound that reached the ears of the Child in the manger was the song of the choirs over the hills of Bethlehem: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." . . . A prayer and a prophecy. . . . A prayer that the hands of the Child, so soon to be torn by nails, would take hold of the hearts of men. . . . A prophecy that those who would bring their hearts to Him would have peace. . . . Tonight as the eyes of Christendom turn toward the manger, that prayer has become more anxious and immediate. . . . It is still possible for men to have peace through Him who ended the war between God and man. . . . The world may have lost peace, but God has not lost it. . . . It has come back into the world over the strange road of the manger. . . .

HOLINESS

With the Child, complete and perfect holiness came into the world of men for the first and the last time. . . . God did not become man to make us contented with the world. . . . He came to make us discontented with the world which now is. . . . He came to give us the final revelation of the world to come . . . He came to talk about a pearl of great price, a wedding garment of incomparable beauty, a fair and real hope on our black horizon. . . . Listen for a moment as the Child become man, prays on the night before His death, John 17:19-23: "And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on Me through their Word, that they may all be one, even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee; that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. And the glory which Thou has given Me I have given unto them, that they may be one, even as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that Thou didst send Me and lovedst them even as Thou lovedst Me." . . . Note the constant repetition of the word "one". . . . We have been made one with
God through faith in the redeeming work of Him who lay in the manger, who came to bring us into the sunlight of His holiness. . . . To make us His family and to take us to live in the eternal Bethlehem. . . .

LOWLINESS

Among the dumb beasts God was born. . . . As the world turns now toward the worship of power, I must remember that the first worshipers of the Incarnate Word were not the great and mighty, not the rich and noble. . . . The oxen and sheep were His company, and the shepherds were His congregation. . . . No power, no sword, no bombs, no guns, no books, no money. . . . The mysterious lowliness of God. . . . Just before Christmas, a few years ago, Heywood Broun died. . . . His last article was a Christmas story of the Wise Man who halted and delayed the richly laden caravan wending its way out of the East on its journey in search of Him who was born King of the Jews.

He came hurrying back to his impatient companions, holding in his hands a long-kept, paint scarred, tin, tumbling, tiny toy.

"But we have gifts fit for a King," his companions protested. "You have gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the King," answered the third Wise Man. "This is for the Child at Bethlehem." . . .

POWER

Bethlehem is the dwelling place of a different power. . . . The first infant cry of the Child was the battle challenge of the Prince of Peace. . . . A few years later four men wrote the story of the 100 days about which God decided to tell us something. . . . They are the most memorable days in the history of man, and their remembrance remains the most precious possession of the human heart. . . . About 695,000 days have passed since the first Christmas. . . . But not one on which somebody would not have died for Him. . . . This is the ultimate power in the world. . . . Hunted from the cradle to the grave, stoned and tempted, rejected by His people, betrayed by His disciples, scourged and mocked and spat upon and crucified, He stands today before the heart of the world as its last Hope, its only Savior, and its everlasting King. . . . The 100 days of His visible life came and went quickly, but the endless days of His invisible life give meaning and hope to time and eternity. . . . This is the power of Christmas. . . .

May your Christmas be all these things.

O. P. Kretzmann