

Australia Local Pages

Repentance—The Gift to Change

By Elder Kevin W. Pearson

The new star above Bethlehem signaled to the Wise Men and Judean shepherds the birth of the promised Messiah, the very hope of Israel. In the Western Hemisphere this same celestial sign came in fulfillment of Samuel's prophecies to the Nephite people, providing hope and relief to the desperate prayers of the faithful believers facing certain death. For them the hope of Israel could not wait another day.

The birth of Jesus Christ, His life, teachings, infinite atoning sacrifice and Resurrection transformed mortality and eternity for everyone and everything ever created. No longer captive by the effects of the Fall of Adam and Eve, mankind became free to choose—and free to change.

“And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon. . . .

“And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death” (2 Nephi 2:26–27).

What greater evidence is there that God is our loving Heavenly Father than the divine gift He gave of His Only Begotten Son? Is it any wonder that we celebrate the birth of Christ by giving gifts? The Atonement of Jesus Christ makes possible the greatest of all the gifts of God, eternal life (see D&C 14:7). It also makes possible the full gift of agency—the ability to choose the gift of repentance, which is the ability to change.

We are accountable for our choices and our willingness to change. We are masters of our own fate. The result of our mortal life will be exactly what we choose—we are accountable for who we become. Agency and accountability are inseparable principles. Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) taught that if in the end we do not choose Christ, it will not matter what we have chosen (see “I Will Arise and Go to My Father,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1993, 65). Eternal life is a gift, but it is also a choice. “Our decisions determine our destiny” said President Thomas S. Monson (“Believe, Obey, and Endure,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 129).

These wonderful divine gifts to choose and to change came at a terrible cost, and are given to us with great expectation and commandment. The Savior's invitation to change is not casual:

“Therefore I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, . . . how hard to bear you know not.

“For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;

“But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I;

“Which suffering caused myself, even God, the



Elder Kevin W. Pearson

greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit” (D&C 19:15–18).

The gospel principle most often taught by the Savior and His holy prophets is repentance—the need to change.

The Savior is loving, merciful, and forgiving in His invitation to “come unto [Him]”.

“Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more” (D&C 58:42). “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18).

The purpose of repentance is not simply to forsake sin; it is also an invitation to become perfect like the Savior. We need to change everything about ourselves: habits, attitudes, behaviors, attributes and even our natures to become more like Him. Accepting that “no unclean thing can dwell with God” (1 Nephi 10:21) can be overwhelming. Confronting the reality of our own weaknesses and inadequacies may compound doubts and lead to discouragement, despair and disbelief. But the gift of the Atonement comes with divine enabling power to help us change and become who we need to.

Understanding the Atonement replaces despair with hope, disbelief with faith, and disablement with divine enablement. “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behaviors,” said President Boyd K. Packer (“Do Not Fear,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 79). How does the Atonement make repentance and change possible?

1. The Savior and His teachings provide the example, the pattern and the power to change. “I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John

14:6). The holy scriptures and words of the living prophets lead us to the gift and influence of the Holy Ghost, who “will show unto [us] all things what [we] should do” (2 Nephi 32:5).

2. Understanding the Atonement enhances our ability to pray with faith, and to obtain true knowledge of Jesus Christ—His character, attributes, teachings and divine nature. This knowledge then reveals an understanding of God, our Eternal Father, and our own divine relationship with Him. “As soon as we understand the true relationship in which we stand toward God (namely, God is our Father, and we are His children), then at once prayer becomes natural and instinctive on our part” (Bible Dictionary, “Prayer”). Prayer brings comfort and peace, the realization that we can change, spiritual promptings about what we need to change, and spiritual power and strength to be successful.
3. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the first principle of the gospel. It is also a gift resulting from personal righteousness and sustained obedience to God. It is an “assurance of things hoped for” (Joseph Smith Translation, Hebrews 11:1) and a divine means enabling us to change. “And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance” (Alma 34:15). Faith in Christ provides us with the means and assurance that we *can* and *must* change—every day.

The new star above Bethlehem appeared over two centuries ago. It was symbolic of Christ and is a reminder of the pattern, the pathway, and the divine power that constantly invites us to change—to choose to become the sons and daughters of God we were born to become. ■

Producing a Meaningful Christmas

By Amanda Watts

Lights, camera, action! It's a familiar phrase we can adapt from its filmmaking origins as we seek to act under the direction of the Spirit and produce a meaningful Christmas for ourselves and our families. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf has said, "We do not need a Christmas holiday or Christmas traditions to remember Jesus Christ, our Savior. But the celebrations of Christmas can help remind us of Him. The hallowed Christmas season can be an opportunity to . . . keep the fire of the Spirit and glory of the Son of God burning in our hearts every day [of] the year."¹ With the Light of Christ more evident

in people at this season, we can often be moved when singing the words of Christmas hymns and touched by acts of kindness we witness.

Lights are an integral part of Christmas with fairy lights on our trees and extra lights on the streets. Opportunities abound for families to discuss the link between the lights going up around them and He who is the Light of the World, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Searching the Topical Guide in our scriptures will lead us to many great passages regarding the light of the gospel (for instance, Psalms 119:105–112; Matthew 5:1–16; John 1:1–12;

3 Nephi 12:1–16; D&C 93:24–37), which could form the basis of family home evenings leading up to Christmas. Discuss aspects of light as it refers to the Saviour, His life, His teachings, our daily lives and our testimonies.

Cameras get plenty of use at Christmastime. Why? Because we want to record special or touching moments that we can share and memories we can rekindle in years to come. Remembering the peace and healing the Lord has given us through His Atonement is a vital part of making Christmas meaningful. President Thomas S. Monson likes to reminisce on Christmas by reading the "story of the birth of Christ as told in the Gospel of Luke, . . .

We can remember Christ at Christmas.



IMAGE COURTESY OF CHURCH MEDIA LIBRARY

[and] *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens . . . and he remembers the change of heart undergone by Ebenezer Scrooge . . . [who] learned that a reward in heaven is based on forgetting oneself and not seeking worldly gain or recognition²—qualities emulated by the Saviour in His life.

A young adult recently commented that her fondest memory of Christmas was the year her mother cut out red and green cardboard hearts. Each member of the family wrote kind words and Christlike qualities they saw in each other member of the family on the hearts and hung them on their tree. Every year since then the hearts have been taken out of storage and put back on the tree.

Action implies effort, pushing the worldliness of the season away and making the sacrifices we need to bring the real spirit of Christmas into our homes. We go into action and work together to provide that special thank you and service to those we love, those we appreciate and those less fortunate. Very young children can help make cookies and give service with their families. Older members can write cards filled with messages of the love, hope and joy the gospel brings to them. A new grandmother says the Spirit is swiftly felt in her home when she puts on beloved carol music—and there are versions to suit every age group! Younger families might dress up and act out

the nativity story. Try putting pictures of them in a prominent place so you can enjoy repeated discussions of Christ's birth and life.

“Because He came, death has lost its sting . . . we will live again. Because He came, we know how to reach out to those in trouble or in distress. . . . Because He came and paid for our sins, we have the opportunity to gain eternal life.”³ These are the teachings that will help produce a meaningful Christmas for us all. ■

NOTES

1. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Of Curtains, Contentment, and Christmas,” 2011 First Presidency Christmas Devotional.
2. “Preparing Our Hearts for Christmas: President Monson,” summary of the First Presidency Christmas Devotional 2011.
3. “Preparing Our Hearts for Christmas: President Monson.”

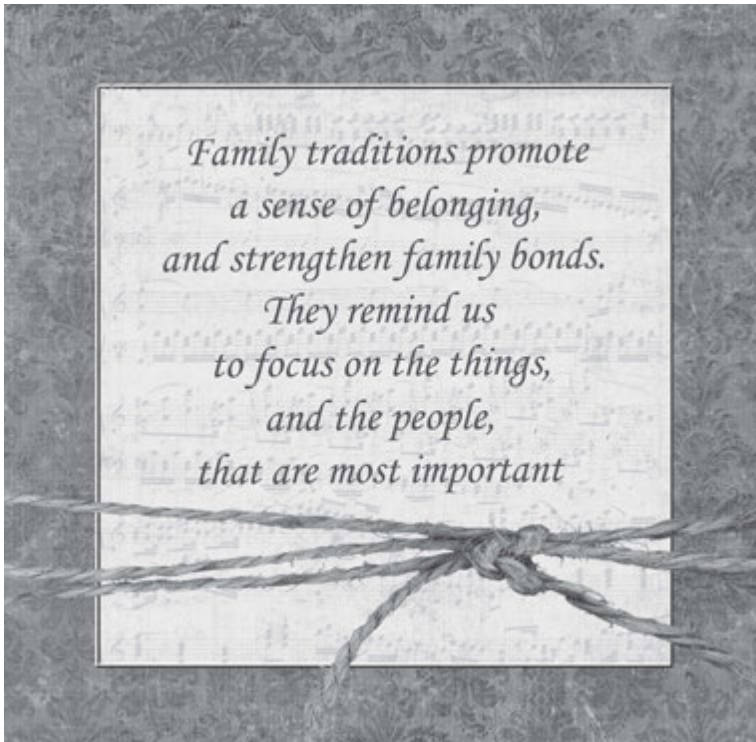
Creating Unique Memories at Christmastime

By Catherine Vaughan

In nostalgic moments, the memories of childhood that warm our hearts are the unique traditions that define our own family. The actual traditions aren't important—it is why you make them a tradition that matters. Family traditions promote a sense of belonging, create positive emotions in each member, and strengthen family bonds. Traditions provide a feeling of stability and consistency, even as life changes about us. When we reminisce about special occasions in our earlier lives, we don't usually remember the gifts we were

given or the words that were said, but the familiar rituals and quirky family traditions are etched into our hearts forever.

Whatever our circumstances, and wherever we may be in our lives, it is never too late to start new traditions or to resurrect old ones that may have dropped off over the years. As we enter another festive season, here are some ideas to enable families to celebrate the birth of our Saviour in their own unique way. Even one or two family traditions will create memories that last a lifetime.



Service Traditions

- Encourage children to perform acts of service within the family and for neighbours. As the service is completed, they can place pieces of straw or hay in the manger of a nativity scene to make it more comfortable for baby Jesus. This reinforces the scripture in Matthew 25:40: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me”.
- Adopt a special cause or charity and raise money or donate gifts or food to them.
- Bake or make treats for local employees in essential services who will be away from their families and working on Christmas Day, such as police, firemen, doctors, nurses, and ambulance drivers. These can be delivered on Christmas Eve.
- Replace an annual generic family newsletter sent out with Christmas cards with a personalised “appreciation” letter, expressing gratitude

for your association with that person or family. Let them know how much you appreciate all they have done, the people they are, and characteristics you admire in them.

- Invite “Jesus” to your family Christmas meal by seeking out people you know who may be alone on Christmas Day and inviting them to share the day with your family. Or put together some Christmas treats to drop off anonymously to a family who may not be able to afford any luxury items.

Spiritual Traditions

- Give the Saviour “presents”. Write down one special attribute or challenge you would like to perfect in the coming year, and work on that as a present to Him.
- Create a scripture tree, decorated with scriptures that relate to the Saviour’s birth.
- Set up a nativity scene, without the Wise Men. Each day leading up to Christmas, hide the wise men somewhere in the house for the children to find, gradually moving them closer to the manger, where they will eventually arrive on Christmas Day to worship baby Jesus.
- Plan an annual trip to see the temple lights.

Gift Traditions

- Begin a Victorian tradition of only giving each person four presents: Something they want; something they need; something to wear; something to read.
- Give each child or family member a special ornament for the Christmas tree as a gift. When they leave home they can take the box of their ornaments, with the special memories that will invoke, and continue the tradition.
- Give the gifts the Wise Men gave: **Gold**—this is a gift of something they really want,

something that will be precious to them, as their main gift. It can be wrapped in gold paper. **Frankincense**—something to encourage their spiritual growth. It could be a book, CD or DVD, or scriptures. **Myrrh**—this is a gift for the body, and could include clothing, shoes, accessories, or perfume and beauty products.

Miscellaneous Traditions

- Make an “appreciation notebook” throughout the year, writing down thoughts and reasons you are grateful. Include kind acts and service that other family members have done throughout the year, and read the entries to the family in December.
- Take a family photo in front of the Christmas

tree each year, with everyone in the same position if possible. This will create a lovely record of how much each person has grown and changed each year.

- Skype grandparents and family members who cannot be with you and sing Christmas carols together.

Traditions impart our family values. When they are aligned with our personal beliefs and core values, and promote family togetherness, they create cherished memories for each member. Traditions give us something to look forward to in our busy lives, especially during the festive season. They remind us to focus on and remember the things and the people that are most important. ■

The Hukilau Luau

By Barbara Horsburgh

In September 2012 the members from Cairns, in Far North Queensland, held a luau as a precursor to their district conference. Previously they had been told a story of a chapel in Laie being destroyed by fire in 1940. A *hukilau* was organized to rebuild the church at that time, with the congregation contributing food, talent, time and energy.

A *hukilau* is a traditional Hawaiian fishing method, where an entire community answers the call of “*hukilau*” to go to the beach. With everyone working

together, enough fish could be caught to feed the entire community and have fish left to sell.

The “*hukilau*” luau was conceived as a way to get members working together, preparing, laughing, and sharing, with a view to cast the net out to the broader community to invite them to participate. The good that transpired on the night, and also in the lead-up, resulted from everyone doing his or her part, trusting, and having faith that Heavenly Father would then make up the difference and provide the miracles—which He

did. Over 600 people attended, and more than half of them were people not of our faith. The miracle of the five loaves and two fishes was witnessed, as there was plenty of food left over.

Participants enjoyed traditional songs and dances from the indigenous cultures of the Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, as well as from the Cook Islands, Samoa, Hawaii and New Zealand.

During the evening of fellowship, fun and culture, the missionaries had a display in the foyer, and they received several referrals during the evening.

President Gardner, district

president, summed it up: “What an amazing evening! It was nothing short of a miracle. Plenty of food, great entertainment, and most important, a wonderful feeling of *kokua* and *aloha*. The Spirit of Jesus Christ was strong. I have no doubt everyone there would have felt it. We had our physical food and wonderful celebration, now it’s time to prepare for our spiritual feast.”

Conference continued on the Saturday and Sunday. The visiting authority for conference was President Langeland from the Brisbane Mission, who said he had never been at a Church meeting where the greater part of the audience (some 350 people) were nonmembers.

Members came to the conference from the two branches in Cairns, Atherton and Innisfail. The Saints from the small branch on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait (over 800 km away) joined the conference via webcast.

Members were challenged to continue with the spirit of the *hukilau*—to work together with one another, to have the rough spots rubbed off so that they fit together perfectly, to be one, to eliminate harsh and unkind feelings, to resolve differences, and as a group to cast their nets out into the community, to bring in those who are prepared to hear the gospel. ■

Creating a Home Away from Home

By Lisa Hall

Over many months Townsville Branch Relief Society has donated dozens of child-sized quilts to Ronald McDonald House, which are then given as keepsakes to its young guests. In August representatives from Relief Society, president Maureen Walker, counsellor Vicki Turnbull, and the quilts’ talented creator, Judith Boorer, met with staff, volunteers, and the Pengelly family from Mackay.

The Pengellys had been in Townsville for nine weeks,

following the premature birth of the family’s youngest addition. For James and his wife, Sharon, who already have three young boys, such a lengthy stay away from home would be made all the more traumatic for want of affordable accommodation and convenient access to their infant son. However, thanks to Ronald McDonald House, this is at least one concern they don’t have to worry about.

Much of the housekeeping and maintenance work undertaken at



Judith Boorer with James Pengelly and 4-year-old Matthew and his quilt.

IMAGE COURTESY OF LISA HALL

the house is done by volunteers, and a great deal more is given by way of donations from individuals, companies and groups across the country.

The Townsville Branch Relief

Society has been one such group, donating dozens of beautiful handcrafted quilts to the house for manager Kerri Wells to gift to the special young ones as keepsakes. During their visit

Sister Boorer took the opportunity to gift one of her quilts made from material donated by sisters in the branch to the Pengellys' son, Matthew, who had turned four the previous day. ■

Sisters Pull Together to Help Children

By Kris Peisley

Cessnock Ward Relief Society worked together with all other Relief Societies of the Newcastle stake, buying and gathering items for emergency backpacks for children in the Newcastle and Central Coast areas.

Newcastle stake is proactive in donating to the communities of the Newcastle stake area, and for several years their project has been helping Infinite Opportunities, Inc., with their supplies for children for CSC Centres.

Over the last six months sisters of Cessnock Ward Relief Society have donated their time shopping,

knitting rugs, and making toiletry bags, as well as donating items to go in the backpacks. Each ward made up backpacks for children of different ages, so Cessnock Ward Relief Society made bags for eight- to ten-year-old boys and girls. It has been a time for pulling together in an atmosphere of love and support for each other and their community.

The sisters met together to assemble the backpacks amid laughter and joyful interaction as they worked on this worthy cause. In September the completed backpacks were donated to Infinite Opportunities, Inc. ■



Cessnock Ward Relief Society sisters with the completed emergency backpacks they donated to charity.

IMAGE COURTESY OF KRIS PEISLEY

AUSTRALIA