

New Zealand 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 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).



Elder Kevin W. Pearson

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

We can remember Christ at Christmas.



IMAGE COURTESY OF CHURCH MEDIA LIBRARY

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, . . . [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 recognition”²—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.”

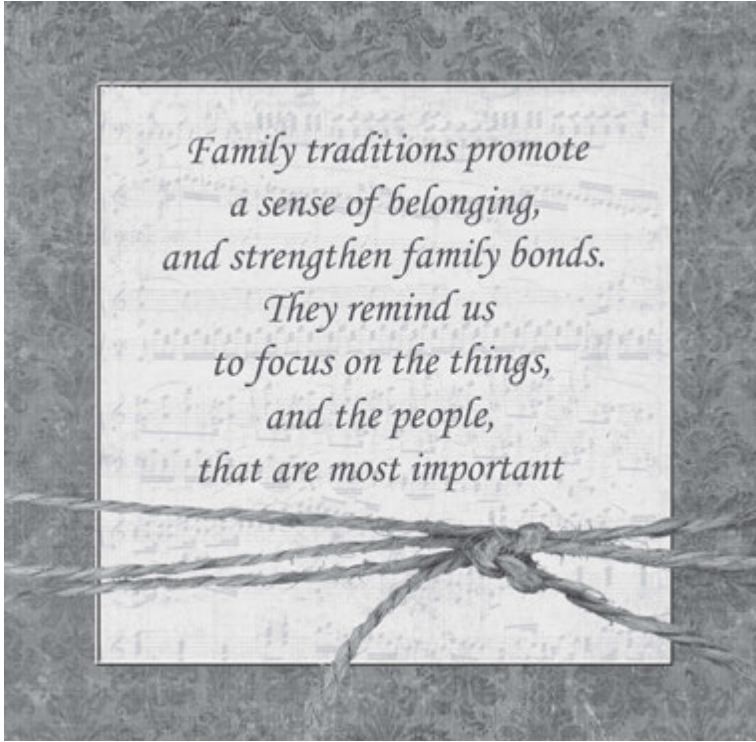
Creating Unique Memories at Christmastime

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 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. ■

How Will I Be Known?

By Elder Jeffrey Larsen

Recently my father, Chester Larsen, passed away. He lived in the same house, in the same modest neighborhood, in central Salt Lake City for over 60 years. There was nothing the world would call outstanding about him. He worked as a labourer, and while he was always active in the Church, his callings were mostly supportive calls in

his own small neighbourhood ward.

After his family, his main passion was missionary work and working in the Salt Lake Temple. He was never active in community events and held no public office. He had no hobbies of consequence, played no sports, and was involved in very few activities outside of

his family and the Church. If one were to sum up his life in one sentence it would be: “He was a kind, loving husband and father to his wife and four children, and he served faithfully in his Church callings throughout his life.”

I was somewhat surprised at the turnout at his funeral—hundreds of people filled the chapel and cultural hall, many of whom I’d never met. Some had travelled many miles to

pay tribute to this quiet, unassuming man. While I had not lived at home for decades, I was surprised at the vast sphere of influence my father had and by the number of people he had quietly touched through his selfless service.

As the oldest son, I was introduced to many of those strangers at the funeral—strangers to me but close friends of my father. During these introductions I heard phrases like: “He was one of our hardest workers, and was always on time.” “He was our home teacher for many years and never missed seeing us every month.” “I worked with your father in the temple; he was one of the best and most dependable.” “Your father used to bring me tomatoes from his garden.” “Your father taught me the gospel and baptized me.”

I knew my father well in terms of the family aspects of his life, but not in his neighbourhood, his ward, or in his missionary and temple work. I saw him for the first time as others had known him. He had touched and influenced many people’s lives in small but meaningful ways. He had loved them . . . and willingly gave of himself and his time. I regret I didn’t know about these aspects of

my father’s life until the day of his funeral.

Since his funeral I’ve wondered what would be said of me if I suddenly passed away. Would I be remembered for sharing with my neighbours, for my missionary efforts, for my work in the temple, or for helping the widows in my ward? My father willingly gave of himself with no expectation of a return. Can I say the same for me?

The Lord doesn’t expect us to achieve a certain “station” in life, but He does ask that we grow and progress in whatever place He’s planted us. It’s the “growing” element that is critically important to our Father in Heaven,

not the achieving part.

In Matthew, chapter 25, we’re taught the parable of the talents. To one servant the Lord gave five talents, to another servant He gave two talents, and a third servant was given one talent. After a long time the Lord returned for a reckoning with His servants. Both the servant with five talents and the servant with two talents had doubled what they had been given and they were rewarded equally. They were rewarded for what they had done, not for the total number of talents they’d acquired. The final count of talents was not their reward; the reward was for their successful

**Jesus Washing
the Feet of the
Apostles, by
Del Parson**



DEL PARSON, © 1983 IRI

growth. However, the servant who failed to increase his talent had it taken from him because he'd made no effort to personally grow.

We have all received counsel from the Brethren that we need to grow; to flourish and bloom in whatever soil we are planted. Again—it is not the size of the flower that matters, but the fact we are willing to grow and bloom wherever we are planted.

In my father's case it was not the value of the four or five

home-grown tomatoes, or the loaf of home-baked bread that mattered, it was the fact that he made the time to serve others. I've often heard, "If I just had more time," or "If my circumstances were different I could do more service." Let's face it, giving service is seldom convenient. Yet it is those who make the time, who place a priority on helping others, who fully understand that when they are in the service of their fellow beings, they are truly in the service of their God. ■

blessed as after 65 years of singing as she can still sing for the choir. Her voice is strong and her pitch is good, although she has moved into alto from second soprano position.

Sister Maere's service started when her children left home and she began delivering "meals on wheels" with the Red Cross in Hastings. She also served an 18-month temple mission.

Now, at 93, she continues to serve, playing the ukulele in rest homes, visiting drug-addicted youth, and serving as a Komatua consultant to the Hastings hospital board 10 hours per month. In this capacity she welcomes visitors with Maori waiata on behalf of the Hastings Mayor, visits the local prison, and is on the hospital board. Sister Maere is also a Justice of the Peace, and conducts her own weekly radio show.

A wonderful example of courage, strength and faith, and selfless service, she encourages everyone to "let their light shine," and get involved in service within the Church and in our communities, that we too can teach the gospel at any opportunity and be better examples of Christ to others. ■

A Lifetime of Service

By Angela McKee

When Tata Wairukuruku Maere was phoned for an interview on her service in the Hastings New Zealand Stake Choir, she answered with a song! This is another example of her love for singing and praising the Lord through music. This year, Sister Maere is quietly celebrating 65 years of service in the Hastings Stake Choir, which practices each week at the little chapel in Bridge Pa, Hawke's Bay.

Sister Maere has been in

service with the choir since she joined the Church in Bridge Pa in 1947. Although she has always felt that through the choir she is contributing to a good cause, Sister Maere has at times asked to be excused from the choir. The stake choir director, Benita Maraekura, always shakes her head and teases, "I never heard that! See you at practice next week!" Sister Maere is always back to practice the following Sunday.

She said that she has been