
A BACKWARDS CHRISTMAS



CQ

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A NOTE FROM HANS DAHL

Merry Christmas everybody!

We all have biases, don't we? We have ways of thinking and ways of doing things that are habitual, seem natural and are just so comfortable. That's why, when our routines are disrupted—for example, when Covid hit—we don't like it!

God actually created us this way. In the back of your brain God placed your cerebellum that is constantly comparing new things you experience to the "way you've always done it." And, guess what? You're actually wired to have a bias toward the familiar.

Why the science lesson?

On the first Christmas Jesus came into this world to do some rewiring—rewiring that seemed *backwards*.

Let me explain. The authors of the Bible tell us that Jesus came into this world to establish the Kingdom of God—the world God wanted for you and me. Here's the kicker, though: In order to establish God's kingdom, Jesus had to rewire the thinking of those ancient people. And here's why this is so important: **The rewiring Jesus did always seemed backwards to those ancient people.** The authors of the Bible described God's kingdom this way:

- *The powerful are brought down and the lowly lifted up. The hungry are filled with good things and the rich are sent away empty. LUKE 1:46-55*
- *The first will be last and the last will be first. MATTHEW 20:16*
- *The poor, meek, hungry, merciful, persecuted and insulted are blessed. MATTHEW 5:3-12*
- *God's own son was thought to be a glutton and drunkard. He befriended crooked tax collectors and sinners. LUKE 7:31-35*

The kingdom God came to establish seemed absolutely backwards to everyone. And, if we're honest, in light of everything around us, it sounds a little backwards to you and me too. On the pages that follow, you will hear the stories of how faith has turned the lives of people who call Calvary home upside down, inside out and had them doing things that seem just plain backwards. I'm so grateful for them!

Merry "Backwards" Christmas!

Hans

FROM CALVARY'S PRESIDENT

Hi everyone,

It's a strange Christmas. It goes without saying that this year we are all feeling the weight of extra stress, anxiety and negativity. We hoped life would be back to normal by now, but instead Covid numbers are climbing. Our students are back to distance learning. We lived through an election unlike anything we've experienced. And now we're preparing for a Christmas that will be so different. All around us—at home, at work and around town, even in our church—we are battling 4 D's each and every day:



- **Doubt.** Are we doing the right thing? Who do we believe?
- **Discouragement.** Why aren't things back to normal?
- **Distraction.** Should we be doing what they are doing?
- **Division.** We assume the worst in others and put them in boxes.

Just like those in the Bible on that very first Christmas, everything seems backwards this year. At Calvary, our theme this Christmas season is "A Backwards Christmas." And I can't wait to see what the staff has planned for the re-telling of the Christmas story.

What if we as a church behaved a little backwards from time to time? Following this backwards God, shouldn't we have a bit of backwards mindset too?

So, as this pandemic goes on longer than we ever thought:

- Rather than doubt, **we trust God**, knowing God is doing great things even during this unique season.
- Rather than being discouraged because we are not back together, **we are confident** in the amazing work God is doing reaching people we have never reached through our online ministries.
- Rather than being distracted by all we could do, **we are focused** on our mission: leading people to a lifelong faith in Jesus.
- Rather than being divided, **we are one.**

Thank you for being a backwards church as we get ready to celebrate a God who came into this world on a backwards Christmas!

Stay home. Stay Safe. Love each other.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Deb Dittberner', with a long, sweeping underline.

Deb Dittberner

MINISTRY CONTINUES IN A BACKWARDS YEAR

The building has been closed for much of the year, but ministry has continued stronger than ever! These are just some of the highlights of what our amazing Calvary community has been able to accomplish in this backwards year.



CALVARY KIDS CRATES

This fall we have 250 kids ages 3 through 3rd grade receiving monthly Calvary Kids Crates. These are boxes full of fun activities and Bible stories to allow families to engage in deepening their faith at home. Sign up at www.calvaryalex.org.

BAPTISM

Since the pandemic began, baptisms have still been a meaningful part of Calvary's life of faith. There have been 39 baptisms this summer and fall. Members of the church have been faithfully making faith chests, crosses, and knitted blankets to share as a gift to welcome these precious children into the life of faith.



CALVARY PRESCHOOL

Calvary Preschool is proud to be in full operation in the newly renovated preschool wing. There are 49 families in our community served by this ministry. These 3, 4, and 5 year olds receive an excellent education in a Christ-centered environment.

CARING MINISTRY

No longer able to make in-person visits due to Covid restrictions, our Caring Ministry team set to work making phone calls and writing letters. Over 1,000 calls have been made by Calvary's staff and Friendly Visitor volunteers to bring joy, companionship, and prayer to our elders.



BACKPACK ATTACK

With school out for the summer, Calvary was instrumental in helping families facing food insecurity. This summer, Calvary volunteers packed over 5,000 bags of food to deliver each week to 180 families in our community. The generosity of our Calvary community resulted in over \$20,000 being raised to fully fund the summer program.

CONSTRUCTION ENDS BUILDING BEGINS

The year-long project to renovate and expand Calvary's building is complete! The finishing touches have been made on the building so that we will be able to welcome people into the space to worship, connect with one another, and serve locally and globally as God has called us. We'd like to give a tremendous thank you first to those who have donated generously to this project. Even during a year that felt so backwards, it has been incredible to see the strong financial support for the project. About 42% of pledges have been received in the first year of the five-year appeal. Thank you to all who have given and will give to support this project!

In addition, we'd like to thank our wonderful community partners who've made this possible. Thanks to JLG Architects for designing beautiful and functional spaces. Thanks to Bremer Bank for guiding us through the financing process. Thanks to ORB Management for walking alongside us in the construction process. Thanks to Innovative Builders who embraced the challenge of our building process and saw each detail through to completion. And finally, thank you to the many subcontractors from our community and from our own congregation who have put their time and energy into the building process.

This project has been a journey many years in the making thanks to the thoughtful leadership of previous generations and the generosity of those among us today. And yet, while construction is complete, *building* is just beginning. We now begin our work to build the body of faith that God has called us to be, being a place that is welcoming to all in order to lead all people to a lifelong faith in Jesus Christ. We look forward to sharing more information in the new year about how we will safely give tours of the new space and start to use the building. Thank you for your prayers, generosity, patience and support!

Calvary Construction Communication Team

Elaine Larson, Rich Rentz, Jay Sieling, Cory Hodgson, Bruce Luehmann, and Katie Rentschler





CALVARY PARTNER NETWORK

Two years ago, members of Calvary's leadership began a conversation with leaders from West Moe Lutheran Church outside of Brandon, MN. West Moe was without a pastor and was not large enough to hire a pastor of their own. They were uncertain about their future, yet had an eagerness to see their church grow. They approached Calvary's staff and said, "We want a little of what you have!"

This is an all too common story for rural churches today. Many are isolated, stretched thin and ill-prepared to meet the unique challenges of ministry today. Traditional models of ministry no longer meet the realities of rural life. There are fewer seminary graduates available and resource-strapped denominations are unable to provide support needed. Covid-19 has only exacerbated these stresses.

At Calvary we want to help all churches thrive so that we can live out our mission: *to lead all people to a lifelong faith in Jesus Christ.* **We want to walk alongside other outstate churches to encourage and support them as they seek to thrive.**

To this end, Calvary leaders, partners and staff submitted a proposal entitled "The Prairie Restoration Project" to the Lilly Foundation. This innovative project utilizes the strengths of Calvary to gather, develop, strengthen and equip a network of outstate congregations, called the Calvary Partner Network. The purpose of the network is to help congregations gain clarity, vitality and adaptability through one-on-one coaching, retreat gatherings, webinars and resources such as curriculum, sermons, bulletins & training. Calvary's proposal was selected by Lilly as one of 92 grants awarded. Awards were given to colleges and universities, theological schools, denominational agencies, individual congregations and other faith-based organizations. Calvary was awarded \$997,100 to invest in outstate congregations over 5 years. To hear more about the Calvary Partner Network visit www.calvarypartners.com.



MEET MADDIE ELLIOTT

You may know Maddie as Calvary's Caring Minister, but now she is also serving as our Minister at West Moe. Maddie is a student at Luther Seminary and her time with us will fulfill her intern requirements to become a pastor. She also serves as the Associate Director at Luther Crest Bible Camp. Maddie is married to Luke Elliott, and the mother to boys Soren and Pax.



OUR NEW FRIENDS AT WEST MOE

Our partnership with West Moe is underway and we've been hearing many encouraging stories from our new partners! West Moe is a tight-knit community where everyone knows your name. We checked in with a few members to see how they've been enjoying new worship experiences with Calvary!

Jason and Katlyn Martin and their four kids are farmers out in Brandon. The harvest season comes each fall and interrupts their typical worship schedule. Jason has joked that, come October, it's pretty normal to see the pews cleared out for a few weeks. No one could have predicted that we'd still be amidst a pandemic and in online worship this harvest season. So did that change how people like Jason and his family were able to participate? They say yes!

Katlyn says that she enjoys the "on-demand" sense of worship and Daily Doses that Calvary has been providing. "It's nice to set the kids up with a project and then turn worship on any time that you have time," she says.

How about in the combine? Jason says that technology has really upped his farming game. With machinery that is able to be programmed, Jason can sit up in the cab with his headphones, stick his phone on a port, and tune into the news, a video, even worship! So, no missing worship for Jason this year.

Online worship has been a great way for us to connect with folks during this time of Covid. But for Jason and his family, it has been even more of a game changer. Covid or not, the farming has got to happen. Online worship allows for families like the Martins to tune in whenever they've got a free moment between parenting, farming, and the various other ways their fall season fills up!

Jason and Katlyn Martin

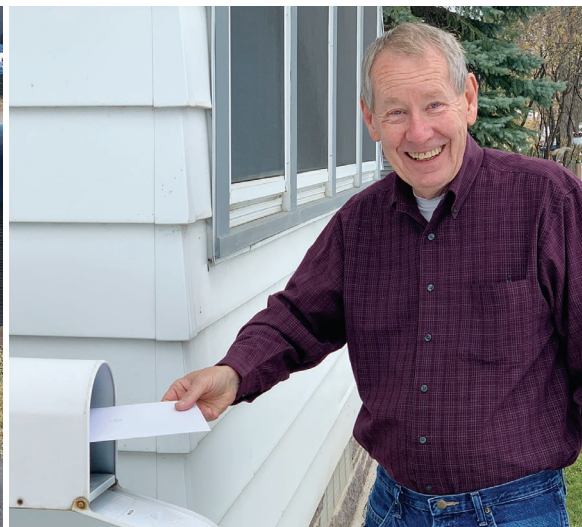
WRITING NEW BONDS

This past March, Calvary staff were contemplating ways to keep our congregation connected at the start of the pandemic. People were feeling isolated, and meeting in person wasn't an option at all. In some instances, we helped people connect digitally over Zoom, but we realized the timeless practice of letter writing could work as well! That's when we started connecting kids and students with Calvary seniors for a traditional pen pal relationship. Over 50 pen pals began at that time.

Leo Capistrant (9 years old) and Jim Lien (slightly older than 9 years old) were assigned to become pen pals. Having never met in person, they began writing and mailing letters back and forth. Leo explained, "I signed up so I would have something to do other than play in my room, and Jim and I write back and forth to each other about every other week. Jim and I write about stuff we like and don't like. We tell jokes to each other. I know he's funny even though I've never met him."

As Jim reflected, "We started writing in March after the church had contacted me. He writes and I write back. It's just been fun having contact with someone younger because I taught elementary school for 35 years. For one letter, I cut it apart into several puzzle pieces for Leo to put back together in order to read. Then for the next letter he cut his into puzzle pieces too. Each time we write we always include a joke, and you have to turn the page upside down to read the answer."

Both Jim and Leo have found that during this time they look forward to going to the mailbox, to see what the next puzzle, or fact, or joke will be. It's been a fun way to connect and they are both excited about when someday they will be able to meet in person.





CREATING NEW ROUTINES

We are so thankful to be a part of Calvary! That is particularly true during this time of Covid. Tim's cancer diagnosis, 3 years ago, compromised his immune system so the struggle to stay safe feels especially important for us. We appreciate all the virtual opportunities Calvary has provided for us to stay connected to our church family.

The spring and summer months have gone pretty well for us. The ability to enjoy the outdoors and visit (physically distanced) with family, friends, and neighbors has been such a blessing. The early snowfall now has us bracing for the winter months. We aren't quite sure how to manage the hibernation coming our way without turning into grizzly bears. Thank God for Calvary!

We've missed the energizing, uplifting Calvary at the Lake services very much. However, the Daily Dose and regular worship services have filled that void nicely! The Daily Dose has actually got me feeling MORE connected to Calvary than I was before Covid. I tune in whenever I can and sometimes go back to listen to episodes I missed or to listen again to one that struck a particular chord with me. We have gotten into a routine for worship on Sunday mornings. We power up our computer and huddle up in front of the screen with our morning coffee and toast. The message and music are always inspirational and it is so fun to see all the comments from others who are watching with us.

Our normal family festivities for the holidays will have to look different this year, which makes me more than a little sad. We will likely be leaning on our Calvary family to help us stay focused on what's important—loving each other the best we can in every circumstance.

Vera and Tim Froemming



ADJUSTMENTS TO TRADITION

Masks, cameras, and a little social distancing, a somewhat typical setting of a wedding nowadays. September 4th was one of the best days of our lives, beautiful and perfect in so many ways. So beautiful and perfect, we had the pleasure of planning it, twice. To us, a wedding and a day that would turn out to be one like no other.

Sawyer and I met at college in North Dakota in the spring of 2014 one weekend while visiting mutual friends. The years quickly flew by as we started to build our lives together. We were enjoying planning the details of our future, until March of this year. Planning our wedding during a global pandemic was less than ideal. However, we tried our best to remind ourselves the reason ‘why’ and who the day was ultimately about...us! It was about our love and lifelong commitment to each other and to God.

Throughout this overwhelming and stressful time, it became important to us to turn to our family and to our faith. We were easily able to stay connected to Calvary even without physically being at church on Sunday mornings. While our Sunday church routines might have looked different, we have always been able to turn to Calvary for a new weekly sermon or Daily Dose message to keep us feeling connected.

During the process of planning, we learned to give each other grace and patience. It is so easy to get caught up in the trivial details that come along with wedding planning. After reflecting since our wedding day, we have realized what a special day we were given. While there is a list of negatives that the pandemic has created among us, we are choosing to look at the positives. We have been given the opportunity to slow down our busy lives and be present with the people we love. We chose to embrace the change of plans and enjoy the day we were given, and it turned out to be the best day ever!

Sarah and Sawyer Hanson



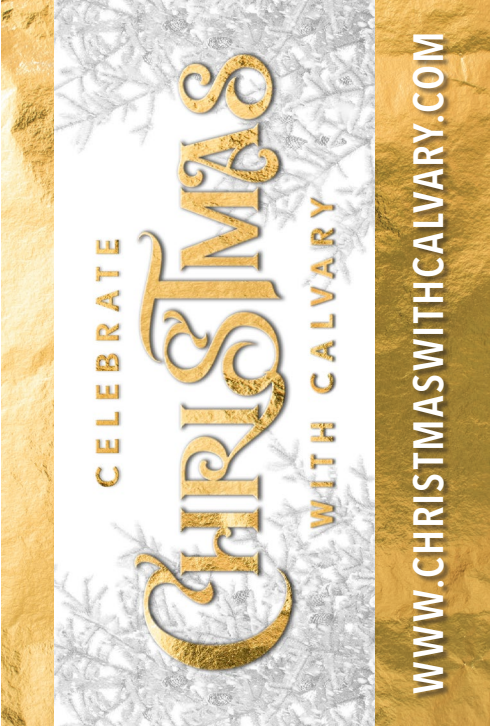
ACCEPTING OUR NEW ROLES

It was the best year. It was the worst year. Reminiscent of the novel *Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens is how our family will reflect upon 2020 for generations to come. We welcomed 2020 on the tails of grief through the experience of pregnancy loss. Then February of 2020 our 3-year-old Everly was hospitalized and diagnosed with both Type 1 Diabetes and Celiac disease which are autoimmune diseases.

As a physician mom sitting in the Children's hospital room life did not seem like it could have felt any more backwards. I had been on the other side of that bed daily. I was the comforter. I was the one that could walk out of that room to care for the next patient. Now all roles were reversed. I was the one watching the blood be drawn from my brave little girl. I was the one being comforted. I was the one holding the fear, the guilt, and the unknown of what this meant for my family moving forward. I was the one that stayed in that room, cried with her and celebrated with her. The one that could see the resilience, the grit, and the determination that these diagnoses would not run her life.

In learning how to become a pancreas, my husband and I grew as parents and as generally more compassionate, patient, and tolerant humans. I learned how to ask for help and through trials learned to graciously receive the help. You see, as a physician I was comfortable in the caretaker role. I was not comfortable in the care-receiver role. My daughter taught me about grace, courage, and trusting all that God puts before us. So yes, this has truly been the worst year, AND THE BEST YEAR.

Sara Olmanson



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