

Luke expounds customs

Sunday School Lesson

Devotional Reading: Psalm 42:1-11.
Lesson Scripture: Luke 2:21-40.

After the Gospel of Luke describes the birth of Jesus and the visit by the shepherds, it records the circumcision and naming of the child (Luke 2:21). We are then told about a visit to the temple in Jerusalem by Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus. We know nothing about what transpired between those two occasions, except to guess that Joseph moved his family to more appropriate quarters than a stable just as soon as possible. Why they had not headed back home to Nazareth becomes clear in today's lesson. The parents had a duty under Mosaic Law to present themselves in the temple at this time with their newborn child.

The law of Moses specified in Leviticus 12 that a woman was to be considered ceremonially unclean for a specified period of time following childbirth. During this time she was not to participate in public worship services or other activities outside the home. This period of being "unclean" was not intended to be a negative reflection upon women nor upon child-bearing, but was essentially a time of recuperation.

To mark the end of this time of uncleanness, the couple was expected to take a designated offering to a priest. While this could be done at home in the local synagogue, the ideal location for this act of purification was the temple. Since Jesus had been born in Bethlehem, just a few miles away from Jerusalem, Joseph apparently decided to remain in the area for a while in order to take advantage to their close proximity to the temple.

The Mosaic Law stipulated a period of uncleanness of forty days following the birth of a boy and eighty days after the birth of a girl (Leviticus 12:4,5). Therefore, we can date Mary and Joseph's temple visit by knowing that the days of Mary's purification...were accomplished forty days after Jesus' birth. The forty day period included the eight days during which circumcision occurred, as the Leviticus 12 passage shows.

Verse 24 indicates that Joseph and Mary offered two birds for Mary's purification—either two turtledoves or pigeons. The Mosaic Law actually preferred a lamb and one bird, allowed the substitution of a second bird if a couple could not afford a lamb (Leviticus 12:6-8). Apparently after the expense of their trip to Bethlehem and their extended stay in the vicinity, Joseph and Mary did not have the financial means to afford a lamb. This suggests that the visit of the wise men occurred at some point after this purification ceremony, because Joseph and Mary certainly could have afforded a lamb had they earlier received the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The purification ceremony for the mother took on an additional significance when she had given birth to her firstborn son. In the last of the ten plagues upon Egypt, according to the book of Exodus, God's death angel killed every firstborn male of man and beast, except those families whose front door had been smeared with the blood of a slain lamb (Exodus 12:7, 13). From that point on, God laid claim to every firstborn male among the Israelites (Exodus 13:2, 12, 13).

Pastor fights drugs, guns with bible

By Michael Raphael
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHILADELPHIA — Facts about Mel Floyd:

- He drives a black van decorated with a torso, a coffin and the words "take dope and end up a dummy."

- He has saved 16,317 souls since 1981.

- Fellow police officers named him one of the "Ten Best Policemen in the World" in 1969.

- He lectures on 325 subjects, including "Seven Things That a Black Woman Should Never Do To Her Man," "Devilish Dating, Devastating Bed and Destroyed Relationships" and "13 Ways Mothers Ruin Their Sons."

- He isn't crazy.

Mel Floyd is a 61-year old, bang-the-Bible, say-amen preacher bent on bringing people to the Lord through a personal knowledge of hell.

As a teen, he carried zip guns and knives, fighting for his gang. He later spent more than 12 years walking the city's toughest streets as a decorated police officer fighting the same evil he once embraced.

Floyd now believes those same survival techniques he learned for saving lives will save the inner cities.

Be you a drug dealer, a lousy dad, a thief or a wandering son, the Rev. Melvin Floyd has ways to reach you. He may not heal the world, but he has been bandaging Philadelphia for 30 years.

Floyd's latest triage efforts have taken him from the drug dealers' corners to an underground chapel where he teaches the nature of love and marriage to standing-room-only crowds.

He believes stronger families mean stronger communities and strong communities mean less crime and he worries about street happenings breaking down the family. "If I stop the failure of relationships, we can produce healthy young people who don't want to do the bad that is killing us," Floyd says.

The night was bitterly cold and the intersection in front of the Agape Christian Chapel had just caved in. Flashing yellow lights warned people to stay away.

They filed right on in. Black women, big and strong, stripping off their bulky winter coats. Wide-eyed men, looking a little shy, surveying the powder-blue walls and the peach steel chairs.

One by one they filled first the seats facing front, then the ones along the side, moving toward the choir box and finally dropping their purses and scarves along the walls and standing.

Up front was the Rev. Floyd. Crisp white shirt. Gray pants with creases sharp as knives.

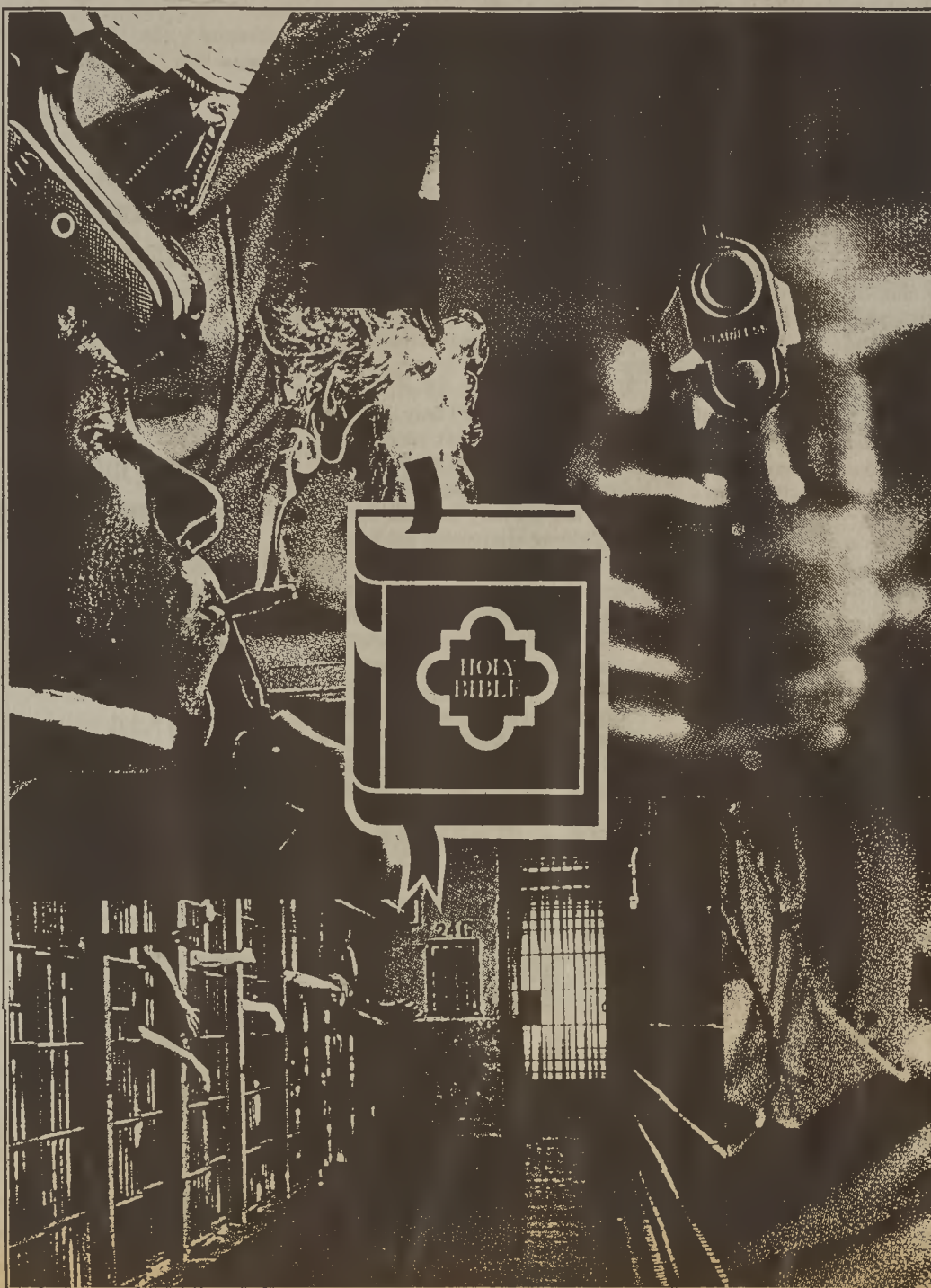


ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL HARRIS

He was, as he always has, waiting for his moment.

"He has become an icon," said Michael C. Harris of the Philadelphia Anti-Drug/Anti-Violence Network. "He's a man that stands for truth, for righteousness."

Harris has watched Floyd lecture high school students in the afternoon, preach about love in the evening and scare the daylight out of street thugs sometime in between.

Somehow he gets to all of them. People just trust Mel Floyd.

They look into his eyes, rich brown and as soft as velvet. They see his smile and hear his laughs, his high-pitched "hehes" and bellowing "ha-has."

When he comes close to them, they feel his breath, as if he's whispering to them and only them.

They also feel his "boldness and courage," qualities he sought and developed while

working the streets.

The evening started slowly. The reverend stumbled over the words, reciting definitions for rejection. Soon he put down his typewritten text. He walked out

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toward the people and they enlivened him.

"Jealousy can get you killed," he started. "Jealousy will cause people to slip into your house and cut up every piece of clothes you have. And then get a match and some gasoline and burn 'em on up, child. Cutting them up is not enough! Do you here me? Make a girl go to an empty lot and get a brick and break every car window. Don't tell me I don't know what I'm talking about. Somebody is laughing pretty hard back there, but I won't go there."

The laughing stopped. Floyd was preaching. Everyone was listening.

God was discovered outside a

movie theater. A young Floyd stood there for more than two hours and listened to a man in a suit make him memorize the words of John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

"That next day, that very Sunday, I joined a church," Floyd said.

After a stint in the Army, Floyd joined the police force. During those 12 1/2 years of beat work, he found the courage to face the drug dealers, thieves and criminals killing the neighborhood.

"I found myself walking in some dark alley, with God-knows-what gangsters and who-knows-what else there. I can't be saying I'm not going in there. I can't do that."

"So I asked God to give me the boldness and the courage."

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Couple labeled Grinches

By William Kates
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ANTWERP, N.Y. — To many of their neighbors, Stephen and Mary Diehl are more vile than any Scrooge or Grinch. At least those holiday-haters eventually succumbed to the Christmas spirit.

For two years, in and out of state and federal courts, the Diehls have fought a neighboring church to stop it from playing Christmas music from its steeple.

This year, feelings have hardened and nerves grown even more strained as the feud continues for a third Christmas in this otherwise serene village of about 700 located 25 miles south of the U.S.-Canadian border.

The Diehls say they have been threatened and harassed by angry residents and now fear for their safety.

"It's gotten very nasty, and getting worse," said Stephen Diehl, holding an unsigned letter left in his mailbox two weeks ago that called him and his wife "crazy" and "evil" and vowed "people will torment you right out of town."

"This last week left us pretty shook up," he said. "We just don't know what to expect."

The First Congregation Church and its supporters say the Diehls are exaggerating their situation, but state police Trooper Jeffrey Stevenson confirmed that the Diehls have filed numerous complaints and requested patrols of their house.

So far, the latest round of harassment has been mostly confined to cars pulling into the driveway and flashing their headlights and blowing their horns, crank phone calls and obscene gestures and remarks from passersby.

However, in the past, Diehl has been assaulted on his front lawn and his wife was confronted in her garden by an angry church member.

State police are investigating the recent letter received by the Diehls, said Stevenson.

"The tone of the letter scares me. The writer has dehumanized us, and that allows them to legitimize anything they do to us," Diehl said.

And all the Diehls wanted was some peace and quiet.

The discord began in December 1994 when Diehl and his wife, Mary, sued the First Congregational Church in Antwerp, complaining that the music blared for hours at a time from loudspeakers atop its steeple into their house 500 feet away. The sound system was donated that fall by a congregation member in memory of his late wife, said Rev. Kenneth R. Leamon, the church's pastor.

The constant carols caused physical problems due to stress, alleged the couple, who work out of their home as wildlife photographers.

A state judge in December 1994 ordered the music cut back to two hours a day. The case has been in and out of state and federal courts ever since.

The Diehls and church, aided by a federal judge, thought they reached a non-binding mediation agreement last December. Now, both claim the other failed to live up to its side of the agreement and that each is blocking any further progress.

"They say they don't want the music stopped, but I can't believe it with all they're doing," said Leamon, who

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Merry little Christmas now blessed

By Dana Calvo
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ENCINITAS, Calif. — He still wants you to have yourself a merry little Christmas, but he'd also like it to be blessed.

Composer Hugh Martin, now a Seventh Day Adventist, has changed the lyrics to the yuletide classic he penned for the 1943 movie "Meet Me in St. Louis."

"My faith means everything to me now. I wasn't even a Christian when I wrote it," Martin said Friday during an interview at his home.

Several months ago, Martin and his publishing company officially changed the chorus from "Have yourself a merry little Christmas..." to "Have yourself a blessed little Christmas."

Originally sung by Judy

Garland in the movie, "Merry Little Christmas" did not achieve mass popularity until the 1970s. By 1990, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers placed it on the list of Most Performed ASCAP Standards.

Martin first began thinking about revisiting his tune in 1974 when he became a born again Seventh Day Adventist in his hometown of Birmingham, Ala.

His faith was tested five years later when he was hit by a Mack truck and suffered a fractured hip and several broken ribs. Elaine Harrison, a registered nurse who lived two blocks from Martin, offered to drive him to weekly mass.

A strong friendship was forged, and Harrison encouraged him to get back into songwriting and singing. Harrison,

68, is now his manager and house mate.

"Have Yourself a Blessed Little Christmas" will be released next holiday season. But Martin printed his Christmas cards on the new score this year, so his friends will get an early peek.

Martin said he is grateful his career was revived by "Merry Little Christmas." In the 1960s after suffering a nervous breakdown from a methamphetamine addiction, his career had come to a standstill.

"I was put on the shelf," he said. "I was out of fashion musically. I didn't get mail. I didn't get phone calls."

Now, he faxes musical arrangements to industry executives and collaborates on projects with singers and songwriters.