SERMONS FOR THE LITURGICAL YEAR

BASED ON THE REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

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INTRODUCTION

This collection of sermons, meditations and homilies for Years A, B and C of the Revised Common Lectionary is gathered from various sources. Each selection is listed according to the appropriate Sunday or holy day along with the date it was preached, the sermon title, and the text or topic.
SERMONS FOR YEAR A

OF THE REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY
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Title: “A Sacred Time of Hope”

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Proper 23
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Proper 25
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Title: “The Will of God In a Nutshell”
Text: Matthew 22:34-46

Proper 26
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Text: Matthew 23:1-12
Title: “Halloween and the Christian”

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Title: “The Special Children of God”
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Proper 28
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Text: Matthew 25:14-30

Proper 29
Date: 21 November 1999
Title: “Entering Gates With Thanksgiving”
Text: Psalm 100:4
Are you ready? Are you ready for Christmas? I confess that I am not as ready as I have been in years past, because my habit through the years has been to purchase Christmas gifts all during the year so that when Christmas arrived, I was already ready. This year I will need to work on my readiness a little more diligently than in the past. My holiday should not suffer, however, because Christmas has usually meant for me something that I expected and anticipated.

Therefore, the great hype of Thanksgiving weekend sales promotions has not usually attracted much of my attention, even though, this year, I am not quite as ready as usual. Mary and I have started on our Christmas decorations, but we have not gotten very far; we plan to get the candles in the windows today. The rest of the decorations will make their way into our home as time allows, and the tree will probably not be decorated until Allen comes home [from college].

So, that is my report; how are you doing with your preparations? Most of us are probably preparing for Christmas as best we can, but Christmas, in spite of all the commercial push of this past week, is not imminent. Christmas is not an imminent threat and, therefore, I suppose, many people do not prepare for it in the same way that we prepare for other events.

For the imminent threats in life, we have such things as fire trucks and rescue vehicles that are always ready. Security systems on our national borders and in our homes are constantly watching out for that which is imminent. But Christmas is different. Christmas, I suppose, is more in the category of things we expect to recover from. It is part of life and life goes on. We make some preparations for it, but we are not surprised when it comes. We will recover from it.

As we Christians use the season of Advent at the beginning of each new church year, however, we have an opportunity to be people who are ready. We not only expect Christmas, we long for it. We read the words of the prophet Isaiah, and we also long for the Lord to establish justice among the nations, and we long for peace to prevail. We read the words of the Apostle Paul and we also long to "cast off the works of darkness" in our lives, and to "put on the armor of light." And we long to be ready for the birth of the Christ child, when eternity will touch the temporal.

When will our longings cease?

As I read the newspaper last Sunday, I was struck with an article about the space station project. As you may recall, a week ago last Friday, the United States and Russia launched a new phase in human space exploration, which the article described as "no less audacious than the building of the pyramids in Egypt or the great cathedrals of Europe." Sixteen nations are cooperating in the building of the space station, which is, so far, designed to
weigh 460 tons and cost 63 billion dollars. The scope of the project is mind-boggling, but something is even more amazing to me. As a person who can clearly remember the race for space of previous decades during the insane nuclear arms race, the most amazing thing to me is that the first phase of the most ambitious international engineering project ever attempted, is being attempted in peace time, and that the first module lifted off a week ago last Friday was carried into space aboard a rocket originally designed to launch multiple nuclear warheads at targets in the United States.

Talk about turning swords into plowshares! Talk about satisfying a longing for peace to prevail! Here is an historic chance “to beat swords into plowshares,” by converting deadly Cold War missiles into peaceful long-haul trucking vehicles for an orbital facility. As one scientist said, with the space station, we will "be realizing for the first time the real true potential of space for solving problems on earth."

The space station has been planned as a full-time laboratory in orbit. Tens of thousands of people in manufacturing plants, both large and small, will be involved in building parts for the station, and engineers and flight controllers half a world apart will be continually ironing out frustrating practical difficulties.

More than one hundred major segments will need to be bolted together in space, like a giant Tinker Toy. When they get the whole thing hooked up, the problem will be, according to Tip Talone, chief of space station processing at the Kennedy Space Center, whether they wind up with an orchestra, or just "a bunch of kazoo players."

There seem to be endless complications, but there is also one amazing simplicity--the simplicity of human longing: the basic yearning and seeking of human nature.

If all goes well, people will be living on the space station in little more than a year. How soon will humans explore Mars? The answer to such a question is difficult, because everything will be new up there: new control centers, new ground teams, new software, new language, new international partners.

If everything goes as planned, however, almost literally, there will be a new heaven; and, as seen from this born-again earth, the space station will be the brightest star in the sky.

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Advent 2
Date: 06 December 1998
Title: “A Sacred Time of Hope”
Text: Isaiah 11:1-10

The future looms large in Advent. We are, as Christians, entering into a sacred time of hope as we look with expectation to the birth of a savior. If we become too preoccupied with our future, however, we miss the saving work of God in our present lives. Therefore, in order to
balance the "far out" hope of last week's lessons, we have, today, a collection of lessons that help us concentrate on the present time, with a particular emphasis on the urgency to pray for the coming of God's Kingdom in the present time.

The watchwords are repentance, and hope, as we pray for the community we are called to be. And we pray for paradise restored. And we pray for a peace-able kingdom.

This morning I would like to paint a picture for us that may represent that hope for us during the weeks ahead.

Recently, I read about the artist named Edward Hicks. Hicks, a Quaker minister, was an admirer of William Penn. About one hundred years after the establishment of Pennsylvania, Edward Hicks produced an estimated one hundred oil paintings of "The Peaceable Kingdom." Why? Because he was fascinated with William Penn's historic treaty with the Native Americans!

Penn came to the colonies to settle the area given to his father, Admiral Sir William Penn, by the King of England, for conquering Jamaica. He soon established the city of Philadelphia and the colony of Pennsylvania, but the way he did it, as a Quaker who was totally opposed to war, was by negotiating a peaceful and amicable settlement with the Native Americans who lived on the land. Most of the colonists had viewed the Native Americans as a natural enemy, but Penn's vision of a society of peace overcame that perception and created an harmonious order in his colony.

How, then, did Edward Hicks, Penn's admirer, compose "The Peaceable Kingdom?"

In the foreground of one version, painted sometime in the 1830s, is a cast of characters from the Isaiah text in the first lesson: the wolf, the lamb, the leopard, the kid, the calf, the lion, the fatling, the cow, the bear, the cub, the nursing child whose hand is over the snake's nest, the older child with her hand over the snake's den, and the child leading the lion. Most of Hick's renderings are full of animals, tightly packed, but each has its own place as it stares out at the viewer, challenging human beings to the same kind of harmony and tranquility the animals share.

In the background of perhaps his most important painting are William Penn and company, and a group of Native Americans by the Delaware River, amicably negotiating a treaty to transfer land from the Native Americans to the colonists. No preference is shown for either culture, as they are approximately equal in number and in the space occupied on the canvas.

In a sermon Hicks preached in 1837, I found him making an interesting assessment of human nature based on Isaiah's description of a Peaceable Kingdom. Hicks believed that all people are born with a "savage disposition," like that of the leopard, the bear, the wolf, or the lion. If undisciplined, self-destruction is inevitable. Therefore, concluded Hicks, salvation depends on a willingness to allow the divine will to reign over our self-will. The resulting rebirth turns a person into a creature of gentleness portrayed by the cow, the lamb, and the kid.
Surely, each of us has met all of them within: leopard, bear, wolf, lion; cow, lamb and kid. They are all right here! And, so it is that Isaiah's portrait of the ideal community challenges each of us to allow the divine will to reign over our self will.

Do we venture to hope that during this Advent season the earth will be full of a knowledge of God so that there will be no destruction or hurt in all of God's holy and glorious Kingdom?

Do we?

Let us pray.

God of history, we venture to hope that our earth may be filled with your knowledge. Prepare our hearts, we pray, to welcome you into our lives as we seek to live in your peaceable kingdom, and teach us how to live faithfully as you are ever faithful to us. Amen.

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Advent 3
Date: 13 December 1998
Title: “Confident Anticipation”
Text: Isaiah 35:1-10

“Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, fear not!’”

As Christians, we know that Jesus came to free us from our fears. So, what do we fear, and from what, exactly, did Jesus come to free us?

Fear is one of the most controlling emotions of modern life. Most of us do not like to think of ourselves as fearful people. We prefer to think of ourselves as strong and independent, as though we have the world under control. But, that is not true, because we, all of us, fear. There are things beyond our control, and to face them, we need the strength of endurance.

This is the second year our church has offered Advent devotionals written by Henri Nouwen. The late Henri Nouwen, a Dutch priest, was a very well known theologian and author. In one of his most famous books, he stated that "fear is the single emotion that controls us most often."

Perhaps I could stop here and ask each of you to find a piece of paper and list the first thousand fears that you have. I am certain that it would not take too long to fill a pad of paper with such a list.

We, all of us, have very real fears. But God says to us who are of a fearful heart, “be strong, fear not.”
So much of what we experience in life is good and beautiful. Therefore, life should be full of rejoicing, not fear. But the problems of life so easily take over and dominate our time, and fears take over and hope fades.

I was an associate in a hardware store for a number of years, and I often witnessed people purchasing plumbing parts in the evening, just before the store closed. I know very well that I, personally, would never tackle even a minor plumbing project in my own home unless I had an entire day to deal with it, and I knew the hardware store was open. I could say that experience has taught me to be patient when tackling a plumbing project. I could also say that when and if I do tackle such a thing, I usually fear making a greater mess than the existing mess, and the fear can take over in the form of procrastination, and the repair may be delayed unnecessarily.

Fear, caution, and patience: these are a number of terms we can use as excuses to avoid doing what needs to be done. Therefore, the words, “be strong, fear not,” are needed in order to help us break through the barriers we create for ourselves that allow fear to take over and hope to fade.

So much in life is good and beautiful, but plumbing problems can make an entire day very bad and ugly. And we all know that one problem often leads to another. The plumbing under the sink was leaking! So what? We fix the leak. But then, we realize that the entire floor underneath the sink has rotted away.

As I think about home improvement projects and repairs, I recall an old poem:

Two men looked out through prison bars,
One saw mud, the other, stars.

You see, one man feared, but the other man hoped.

How do we face life’s needed projects, and life’s necessary repairs? With fear, or with hope?

As we look toward Bethlehem, we look to a star, and we look to a time when God will say to us, "be strong, fear not." There may very well be times in our lives when fear may appear to take over and our hopes may appear to fade away. They are the very same times when we need to ask God to find new strength for our week hands, and new firmness for our feeble knees. Yes, we are getting older, and the causes of our physical weakness and our feebleness may be very obvious, but there is still no excuse for a fearful heart. So, be strong, fear not!

During this season of Advent I invite you to join me in looking at ourselves, and asking ourselves, where in our lives is fear taking over and hope fading? But as we look, remember this. Fear takes over most of all in those places in our being where we fail to reach out to others with the real message of Advent, which is, basically, a message of salvation. Therefore, let us reform our questions about fear, and redirect them.
Whose weak hands need to be strengthened, and, how can we help strengthen them? Whose feeble knees need to be made firm?

Where in this world of mine is fear taking over and hope fading?

Who, this Advent, needs to know for a fact that God will inevitably come and save them with a little hope from you and me?

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Advent 4  
Date: 20 December 1998  
Title: “Joe’s Doubts”  
Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Who was Joseph?

As far as the character of Joseph is concerned, one of the most revealing passages in the New Testament is the passage from Matthew that was read this morning. From this passage we learn that Joseph's lineage includes a number of prominent figures in Jewish history. This man was a somebody: not an anybody, not a nobody – a SOMEBODY. Furthermore, Joseph is described as "a righteous man." When the woman to whom he was betrothed was found to be pregnant, he considered divorcing her "quietly," as opposed to publicly and loudly, but then, after he had a nap, he changed his mind.

He became a devoted and caring husband and father who did everything imaginable to care for his family. There are no unkind words written about Joseph. In fact, Jesus is often referred to as "Joseph's son," "Joe the carpenter's boy."

What else do we know about Joseph? Very little! The biblical attention to the holy family, and the theological attention, all is given to Jesus and to his mother, Mary.

At Christmas time, during this age of increased political correctness, however, we might wonder if Joseph has really been given the credit he is do as a father and husband. Just look in any hymnal and try to find a hymn or carol about Joseph. We Protestants used to have a few, but even the most popular Joseph carol has been removed from most modern Protestant hymnals, probably because of anti-Roman Catholic sentiments due to its references to Mary. Its title is "Joseph dearest, Joseph mine," and it is sung to a beautiful lullaby. It starts as a tender love song, the first verse sung by Mary, the second verse sung by Joseph, and the third and fourth verses sung by servants as commentary.

Joseph dearest, Joseph mine,  
Help me cradle the child divine;  
God reward thee and all that's thine
In paradise,
So prays the mother Mary.

Then Joseph replies:

Gladly, dear one, lady mine,
Help I cradle this child of thine;
God's own light on us both shall shine
In paradise,
As prays the mother Mary.

Peace to all that have good will!
God, who heaven and earth doth fill,
Comes to turn us away from ill,
And lies so still
Within the crib of Mary.

All shall come and bow the knee;
Wise and happy their souls shall be,
Loving such a divinity,
As all may see
In Jesus, Son of Mary.

Is this carol about Joseph? No, but it at least names him and gives him some credit for being the loving husband and father that history records.

If we want to find hymns about Joseph, even in a Roman Catholic hymnal, we need to look under the topic, "Saints.” Even there we will find only one or two about Joseph. There are none listed under Joseph.

Modern theological reflection on this matter has been changing over the past three decades, however. For instance, in the Church of Saint Michael in Nashua, where I play the organ for the Saturday evening liturgy, during the restoration and redecoration of the church interior two years ago, new statues were ordered to illustrate contemporary theological reflection.

Most of us here this morning have undoubtedly noticed the traditional side altars or statues in the front of traditional Catholic churches. On the left side of the main altar there is usually a Mary altar, or a statue of Mary with the baby Jesus. On the right is the Joseph altar, or a statue of Joseph, alone.

When the congregation of Saint Michael's voted to replace their traditional statues, they chose to order one new statue that included all three members of the holy family.

Monsignor Spaight, the pastor of Saint Michael’s, and I talked about the new statue several times. "Yes,” he declared, "we decided to get the family back together again." My sly, Protestant reply was something to the effect that I had always thought the traditional,
divided portrayal of the holy family had appeared to be of a somewhat dysfunctional family, and he agreed.

Joseph is one of the so-called "great" saints of Catholic sainthood, but how would anyone know it? In my surveys of hymnody over the years, however, I have found amongst Catholic hymns a remarkable change of language in the newer Joseph hymns that have become popular in American Catholic churches. Whereas archaic Joseph hymns from the Latin and Eastern Orthodox hymnals often refer to Joseph as "foster-father of our Lord,"

listen to these words of a popular, American, Joseph hymn from the turn of the century.

O blessed Saint Joseph, how great was thy worth,
The one chosen shadow of God upon earth,
The father of Jesus! Ah, then, wilt thou be,
Sweet spouse of our Lady! a father to me?

For thou to the pilgrim art father and guide,
And Jesus and Mary felt safe by thy side;
Ah, blessed Saint Joseph, how safe I should be,
Sweet spouse of our Lady! if thou wert with me!

When the treasures of God were unsheltered on earth,
Safekeeping was found for them both in thy worth:
O father of Jesus, be father to me,
Sweet spouse of our Lady! and I will love thee.

There is an obvious use of "father" here in more than a legal sense, reflecting the way Jesus used the term "father" when he taught his disciples to pray to God.

A modern Joseph hymn, written in 1970, and one of only two in the new hymnal used at Saint Michael's, offers these inclusive reflections for all families and for the entire human family.

O Joseph, mighty patron,
Your love and strength bestow
Upon a pilgrim people
Who are the Church below.
You were the Father's image,
Great prince of David's line;
Obtain for us God's blessing
That we may be God's sign.

Great Saint, you cherished Mary,
Who loved and cared for you;
You taught and nurtured Jesus,
O teach us to be true,
True to the Church he founded,
Until we form above
A family united
In bonds of lasting love.

This text is set to a well-known Protestant hymn tune.

There has been throughout Protestant history an ongoing debate about Joseph's paternal status. The term "pledged" in today's lesson, which in older translations was often translated, "betrothed," could indeed mean "married" as well as what we would call today "engaged." In Joseph's day, however, brides were given and received like property, making the modern term, "engaged," inaccurate.

What else do we know? We are certain that Mary and Joseph were married when Jesus was born. Jesus was not born out of wedlock. We also know that the Greek term translated as "virgin" can also be accurately translated as "young woman."

We know that Jesus had a number of brothers and sisters. We know that Jesus’ family had very strong family values. We know that they worshipped together regularly.

I also know that, as a kid, when I was assigned the part of Joseph in the Sunday School Christmas pageant, my character said nothing. The part of Joseph was a bit part, and I played it well by just standing still in one of my father's old bathrobes, with my mouth shut.

Who, then, was this mysterious, underdeveloped character? Obviously, too little attention has been given to Joseph's part in the gospel story. As we read today's gospel lesson, and we read between the lines, we learn of a just man, and of a man obedient to the will of God in spite of his doubts. He is described briefly but precisely as a person capable of great kindness and understanding, and of extraordinary sensitivity. He is a devoted husband and father, and the care of his household is obviously reflected by the way Jesus used the term "father" so intimately as he taught his disciples to pray.

What greater tribute can a father have? What greater compliment can a parent desire?

Therefore, we must conclude that Jesus’ father was most assuredly one of the channels through which Jesus drew some of his incomparable wisdom and faith.

Joseph might stand quietly in most Christmas pageants, having no lines to say, but in Joseph's character resides a model of faithful confidence, which we also find in his son.

And we--you and I--we know that we also have the option this season of walking with Joseph toward Bethlehem, there to find God in the midst of life's awesome circumstances, bringing new possibilities to the likes of you and me.

Amen.
The holly and the ivy,
When they are both full grown,
Of all the trees that are in the wood,
The holly bears the crown:

The rising of the sun
And the running of the deer,
The playing of the merry organ,
Sweet singing in the choir.

The joyful carol, “The Holly and the Ivy,” is one of my favorites. It is not only appropriate for the nativity season, but was also originally sung during Lent, and as a carol for autumn.

How is it that carols represent such a powerful tradition, ringing with the exultation of Christmas? We have many fine Christmas hymns for the season, but Christmas would not be Christmas without carols. Like friendly spirits, carols drift in with their warm, familiar strains, evoking nostalgic memories. They are sung by the young and the old, in church and home, in railroad stations, airports, village squares, shopping malls, and snow covered streets. Speaking with many tongues, they are the voice of Christendom, echoing the exultation of that starlit night at Bethlehem.

"Christ is born in Bethlehem!" proclaims the popular "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." And most carols concentrate on the Christ child, Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds. If some carols add that the infant's hair is curly, that Mary sang lullabies, and that there were oxen and donkeys and lowing cattle in the stable, theirs is but a poetic license that makes the scene more vivid.

Carols come up with roses, camels, golden harps, and torches, too. If we find a great deal of snow in them, it is, no doubt, because so many of their authors hail from northern climes—although snow is known around Bethlehem, which occupies a ridge some 2500 feet above sea level. The town also lies well inland, which gives the ‘three ships” sailing into Bethlehem in one of our oldest carols a rather difficult challenge.

Some carols are purely secular, such as the "Twelve Days of Christmas." Some honor patron saints, such as Good King Wenceslas.

"The Holly and the Ivy" harkens back to pre-Christian times. One of the earliest Christian carols is found in our hymnal, "Of the Father's Love Begotten," by the fourth century Spanish monk, Prudentius. But it was the gentle minstrel of the Lord, the monk, Francis of Assisi, who infused the Church's Latin formalism with the human warmth that brought
carols into their own special realm. On Christmas Eve, 1223, on a wooded hilltop near the village of Greccio, in central Italy, Francis set up the first crèche scene, complete with ox and donkey and the infant in the manger, bestowing upon Christmas a new, tender emphasis—the poverty and humanity of Christ.

Almost over night, Christmas became a feast of massive popular participation. Nativity plays were staged in churches and in market squares. The intervals between the acts were filled with carols. For the first time, people were singing pious songs in their own language, with perhaps a few scraps of Latin thrown in. Nearly a thousand carols bloomed on English soil between 1400 and 1600, the Golden Age of carolry.

To make a long story short, there has been a tremendous outpouring of carols for centuries. During this century, carols have come to us from all over the Western world. Each Christmas, they stay with us but a brief season, it is true, yet their deep and ancient roots make them a living part of our culture.

So, wherever you sing your carols this season, sing them with a full voice. Many of them were and still are dances that help us celebrate Christmas joyfully in song. Let them carry through the stillness of midwinter, to share with others the mystery and the glad tidings of the Christian faith. And may God bring to each of us tidings of comfort and joy.

Amen.

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Epiphany
Date: 03 January 1999
Title: “The Star of Bethlehem: The Great Celestial Dance”
Text: Matthew 2:1-12

(From a lecture by Craig Chester, 1993, president, Monterey Institute for Research in Astronomy MIRA. Ph.D.)

Ancient Magi understood planetary motions quite well. Centuries before Christ, they were capable of predicting the conjunctions of stars and planets, and their calculations were only off by a few days. There is therefore no need to invoke God or divine miracles to explain what happened in the heavens to attract the attention of Magi. Natural laws are sufficient. But is this kind of sufficiency really enough for us? The significant question raised here is not what happened, but why it happened. What meaning, what room for God do we find in the events that we know to have occurred?

First, what do we know? Today we know that the universe is composed of atoms. As someone once observed, however, we also know that the universe is composed of stories as well as atoms. The story of the star of Bethlehem is a mystery, a puzzle, involving not only theology and astronomy, but also history, and even astrology. It is an attempt of human
beings to understand not the universe at large, but specific events, or what real people actually saw. What do we know today about what people could have seen in the heavens when Christ was born? Actually, we know quit a bit.

Magi is the plural of Magus, the root of our word for Magic. They were court astrologers, i.e. wise men, held in high esteem. The Magi recorded in the gospel of Matthew might have been Zoroastrians, Medes, Persians, Arabs, or even Jews. They served as court advisors, making forecasts and predictions for their royal patrons based on their study of the stars, about which they were quite knowledgeable. Magi often wandered from court to court, and it was not unusual for them to cover great distances in order to attend the birth or crowning of a king, paying their respects and offering gifts. A visit of Magi, such as Matthew records, would have appeared to be a serious matter to Herod.

When did the Magi appear in Judea? Historians assume Jesus was born between 1 BCE and 1 CE. But the calendar, on which these dates are based, was set by the Roman monk Dionysius Exiguus in the year 525 CE, long after the fact. Scholars writing in the first and second centuries of the Common Era, asserted that Jesus was born between what we now call l4 BCE and 1 BCE.

One difficulty in seeking a precise date is the fact that Matthew reports two separate sightings of the star. First the Magi saw the star rising, referring to its acronychal rising, when an object rises at sunset and is visible all night. After they come to Jerusalem--we do not know how long that took--they see the star again. There is no indication that the star was in any way involved with the journey. The indication seems to be that they had seen its rising, predicted its reappearance, and witnessed its reappearance, as predicted, when they reached Bethlehem. "There before them was the star they had seen rising," writes Matthew.

What are the astronomical possibilities? It is safe to say that, since Origen first raised this question around 250 CE, every astronomical event known to have occurred during the decade of interest, has at some time been proposed as the star of Bethlehem.

What else do we know? A major key to the chronology is the date of Herod's death. Herod was alive when the star appeared, and although his death is commonly quoted as 4 BCE, we know that the War of Varus, known to have occurred following Herod's death, can be dated to 1 BCE, where it fits the other known facts perfectly. Therefore, if Herod died in the spring of 1 BCE, we are free to add the years 3 and 2 BCE to our search for the Star of Bethlehem according to most of today's astronomers and historians.

What was happening in the heavens then? The year 2 BCE marked the 25th anniversary of Caesar Augustus's rule, and the 750th anniversary of the founding of Rome. Huge
celebrations were planned. The whole empire was at peace. In order for the entire empire to celebrate at once, an enrollment, or census, was ordered. This enrollment, described in Luke, which brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, has always been a mystery, since no regular taxation census occurred at that time.

What astronomical events might have been related to the Star of Bethlehem? There is no historical record of a nova. The records of comets during that time are not impressive. Halley's Comet appeared in 12 BCE without impressing anyone.

In September of 3 BCE, however, Jupiter came into conjunction with Regulus, the star of kingship, the brightest star in the constellation of Leo. Leo was the constellation of kings, and it was associated with the Lion of Judah. The royal planet approached the royal star within the royal constellation representing Israel. Just a month earlier, Jupiter and Venus, the Mother planet, had almost seemed to touch each other in another close conjunction, also in Leo. Then the conjunction between Jupiter and Regulus was repeated, not once, but twice in February and May of 2 BCE. Finally, in June of 2 BCE, Jupiter and Venus, the two brightest objects in the sky, save the sun and the moon, experience an even closer encounter when their disks appeared to touch; to the naked eye they became a single object above the setting sun. The Magi could not have missed this exceptionally rare spectacle.

These are only the highlights of an impressive series of planetary motions and conjunctions of that period.

How then do we view the final appearance of the star on the Magi's journey to Bethlehem? It would have been in the southern sky. Could it have stopped over Bethlehem? Yes, say astronomers, because the word "stop" was used for what is now called the planet's stationary point. As a planet approaches the opposite point in the sky from the sun, it appears to slow, then stop, then move backward, westward, through the sky. Astronomers know that in 2 BCE Jupiter performed one of these so-called retrograde loops, and that it was stationary on December 25th, during Hanukkah, the season for giving presents.

Modern scientists have proven that natural laws are sufficient to explain the star of Bethlehem. We know what could have happened. We essentially know that it did happen. But why? What does the Star of Bethlehem mean? Was Matthew correct in seeing this event as divine confirmation of a central moment in God's plan for humankind? What room is left for God? Was God's purpose fulfilled by the great celestial dance that we call the Star of Bethlehem?

No theologian can say, in a way convincing to a scientist, that some event required an act of God outside natural law. Similarly, no scientist can say that some event was merely an act of natural law working itself out with no other meaning.

Therefore, no one is forced to believe that what happened in the heavens two thousand years ago, was a simple, natural event devoid of meaning. It was an event that occurred right at the intersection of Christianity and science, in a world created by a God who chose to institute natural laws, but who, nevertheless, continues to carry out his own purposes.
Thanks be to God! Amen.

Epiphany 1
The Baptism of Jesus
Date: 10 January 1999
Title: “The Person and the Work of Jesus”
Text: Matthew 3:13-17

This Sunday, we celebrate Jesus’ baptism. The baptism of Jesus inaugurates his ministry in all the gospels. This celebration is an ancient one, and in modern times it is patterned after the practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church, because, for some reason, it had fallen out of favor in the Western Church for quite some time.

This event calls us at the beginning of the calendar year to remember our baptisms, and to examine once again how faithful we have been to our call to follow Christ. For this reason I have included in the bulletin this week an insert with a typical Baptism Covenant of the type that are now being used by most denominations to remind us of the relationship between baptism and the work of ministry. This practice started years ago when the World Council of Churches published a worship service to be used by all denominations for this purpose, and it has become widely used. The ministry under consideration here is Christ’s ministry, not our own, and not even the Church’s ministry, but, specifically, the personal ministry of Jesus Christ.

One of the greatest preachers of the early Church, Peter Chrysologus, in the fifth century, spoke of today’s celebration as the psalmist prophesied: "The voice of the Lord is heard above the waters." The voice says, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

These are very interesting words as they take us back to the beginning of the Bible where God is moving over the face of the waters at Creation, then on to the waters that flooded out Noah's civilization, and then to the Christ event where Christ’s ministry begins with his baptism in the River Jordan.

As I mentioned, there has been a renewed interest and a renewed emphasis in this special day on the Church’s calendar. Many denominations use this Sunday to baptize all their available baptism candidates, thus adding to the emphasis of the day.

Years ago, when I was serving an Episcopal church as organist and choirmaster, that denomination had an interesting newsletter with a humorous section that included actual, documented bloopers from church bulletins and newsletters. One church had so many baptism candidates saved up for this particular Sunday, that the two priests of that parish decided to use both baptismal fonts: the traditional one at the back of the church, and an older baptismal font that stood in the front of the church. In her crunch to get the newsletter...
printed and mailed on time, the church secretary chose her wording rather hastily as she wrote about the use of both baptismal fonts, front and back, during the coming Sunday's worship service. "Because of the number of baptisms in our church this coming Sunday," she wrote, "babies will be baptized on both ends."

Whether we have been dunked or poured upon or sprinkled, whether we were adults at the time of our baptism, or young adults, or children, or infants, and now have no memory of the event, today I invite you to reaffirm your baptism, which celebrates through our lives the ministry of Jesus Christ entrusted to us. Today, we celebrate Christ's ministry among us, not simply our good intentions; not the greatness of our own goals, but the ministry of Jesus Christ of which we are a part. Through the wonderful story of Jesus’ baptism, we are told and given evidences of who Jesus is. He is the Son of God, who is always ready and able to fulfill God's will.

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Epiphany 2  
Date: 17 January 1999  
Title: “The Lamb of God”  
Text: John 1:29-42

My sermon this morning is a meditation on the theme of Jesus as the Lamb of God.

Throughout my years as a pastor, I have often thought it confusing for others, if not also for me, to think of our Lord as both shepherd and sheep, and I am quite sure that my concerns about these mixed metaphors began when I was a child. This problem is especially evident during the brief time we Christians spend between Christmas and Easter. First we hear words of prophecy in Advent: "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; and he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." Then, a few months later, we hear, "Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world." Then, at Easter, we hear, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain...." How do we get from the shepherd to the lamb?

Possibly, some of you are thinking about the texts chosen by Handel for his oratorio, the Messiah. I do, when I think of these images.

Furthermore, as a church musician I learned that some of the most beautiful liturgical music ever written has been written for the words of the Agnus Dei, the canticle, "Lamb of God," which is traditionally sung in liturgical churches just after the Peace, and just before receiving holy communion. The words are simple, and they are taken from today's gospel lesson.

O Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.  
O Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.  
O Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world, grant us thy peace.
The set of three sentences in King James English lends itself very well to musical settings. Modern English versions are not quite so poetic, such as, “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us....” Worse yet, when the "thee-thou" language went out, and the "you-who" language came in, we wound up with, “You who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.” You who... and You who! Fortunately, that awkward translation has disappeared.

Another modern version of the same hymn is:

Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on us.  
Jesus, bearer of our sins, have mercy on us.  
Jesus, redeemer of the world, give us your peace.

Other invocations are also used, such as Jesus, bread of life, and Jesus, Prince of Peace....

John the Baptist gives Jesus two titles in today's lesson: Lamb of God and Son of God. Both are titles of the Messiah. Obviously, according to the Baptist, these two titles stand for the same person, and mean the same thing--Jesus is the Messiah!

Was John the Baptist, or the writer, John the Evangelist, referring to a verse in Isaiah (53:7): "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its sheers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." Or was John the Baptist, or the writer, referring to the Paschal Lamb, or to the two lambs that were sacrificed daily in the temple in Jerusalem?

The answer to this question does not seem to be important. Understanding this, however, we may avoid being concerned about what otherwise may seem to be a mixed metaphor. After all, sheep are relatively peaceful, pastoral animals, but they are not very intelligent, and the Bible contains a number of references to people as sheep that are anything but flattering. "All we like sheep have gone astray," wrote Isaiah (53:5). These different images of sheep are not complimentary, and we do not want to mix them here.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," reminds us that we, as sheep, need to be tended. We need to be led to green pastures, and still waters, and watched over at night. The rod and the staff of the Lord are needed for our protection, because we do not do very well on our own. So, why then is Christ called the Lamb of God?

We hear this title, Lamb of God, also on Good Friday. From the gospel of John we learn that the crucifixion of Jesus took place on the Friday before the Passover, on which the Jews slaughtered lambs for their Passover feasts. Therefore, John the Evangelist, the writer of the fourth gospel, (we are talking about two different persons named John) probably used this title, Lamb of God, in his writing, because he was writing specifically to Jewish Christians, not gentiles. Also, it is here and here only that John the Evangelist attaches the gift of the forgiveness of sins specifically to Jesus’ death. This writer is telling us that Christ, the Lamb of God, was sacrificed for us to bear our sins, to redeem the world, and to grant us his peace.
This is probably what John the Evangelist meant, but what did John the Baptist mean when these words are put in the Baptist's mouth? What was on the Baptist's mind when he uttered these words? We do not accurately know. There are many theories, and not all of them are helpful.

In the book of Revelations (5:6, 11-14), we find an additional reflection: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" George Frederick Handel chose these verses for the climax of his oratorio, Messiah. His beginning for part two of his oratorio began with the chorus, "Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world," and, yes, the chorus soon sings about sheep gone astray, but in the ending of part three, the last great utterance before the Amen, are the wonderful words from Revelation. Why? Because, I suppose, they were the greatest words from the Bible that Handel could use before he declared the final AMEN to his greatest work.

This is my message this morning--indeed, more of a meditation than a sermon--something to meditate upon in the week ahead: Christ, the Lamb of God, who was sacrificed for us to bear our sins, to redeem the world, and to grant us his peace. Amen.

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Epiphany 4
Date: 31 January 1999
Title: “The Spontaneous Qualities of a Grateful Life”
Text: Matthew 5:1-12

Most Christians know the Sermon on the Mount as the essence of the Christian faith and life. Also, for most Christians, the Beatitudes are known as the essence of the Sermon on the Mount. It is therefore nothing extraordinary to willingly join one of the world's most widely read religious authors, William Barclay, in saying that the Beatitudes are the essence of the essence of the Christian way of life.

Modern translations of the Beatitudes evoke strong feelings and thoughts, for some of them present the Beatitudes as they were originally presented--as exclamations instead of statements. HAPPY the poor in spirit! HAPPY those who mourn!

The only problem here is that when the verb is left out in the English language, these modern ears are confused. Whether we use blest, or blessed, or happy, or how happy, we modern folk need the verb in there in order to make sense out of these ancient Greek exclamations.

But, just for the fun of it, let us go back to the old Authorized Version of the Bible, from 1611, known as the King James Bible, which many of us grew up with. Did you ever notice the italicized words in the King James Bible?
Many years ago, I discovered that none of my several King James Bibles anywhere explained the appearance of those italicized words. One of my colleagues in seminary used to insist that they were words that were supposed to be emphasized. How wrong he was. The words in italics, as they are found in the old King James Version, were words that were NOT in the original Greek or Hebrew texts. The translators added them in order to, as far as the translators were concerned, clarify the meaning of a sentence or phrase for people who were reading these passages in English. This was an admirable thing to do back in 1611. (However, this also points out that translation usually includes interpretation, which may or may not be desirable, depending upon the objectivity or subjectivity of the translator.)

If, then, we look at the Beatitudes in the King James Bible, what do we find? We find that the verb is in italics. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” The translators added the verb in order to make the Beatitudes into statements. As statements, however, many of the Beatitudes do not make sense. For instance: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” After this year's farm problems, this is like saying, “Blessed are the bankrupt farmers, for they shall inherit the land.” As statements, many of the Beatitudes do not make sense.

Luke's version of the Beatitudes is even more destitute than Matthew's. Matthew at least spiritualizes some of the sayings: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Luke is more absolute: “Blessed are the poor.”

Any fool knows that poverty is a curse, not a blessing. There is no greater enemy to human happiness than poverty. We as a nation know this even as we cut welfare spending, while at the same time we spend billions of dollars and a great deal of time and energy to pursue and possess happiness. But the fact is, that true happiness cannot be possessed, or planned, for that matter.

We need to keep in mind that the word "happiness" comes from the root "HAP," which means "chance." Blessedness, which can be translated as Happiness, is not a planned product. It is a deep and peaceful satisfaction that happens in the course of certain attitudes and actions. So, you see that the modern dog-eat-dog happiness cult is a farce. Truthfully, I believe it is a greater source of insecurity and sadness in our society than poverty. The only security wealthy people have is the security against one evil--just one--only one: poverty. But, is that really security? Is that a real assurance of happiness?

“Blessed are they that mourn.” Isn't this more astonishing than the poverty business? It is absurd to speak of the joy of sorrow, the gladness of grief, the bliss of a broken heart. SO, WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?

We can probably go along with the merciful obtaining mercy, and the pure of heart seeing God, and the blessedness of the peacemakers, but soon we are undone again by the persecution business.

The beatitudes, by definition, pretend to deal with happiness and true blessedness. But, where is the spirit of mercy and hospitality and kindness, graciousness, humility, meekness,
purity of heart, peacemaking, and hungering for righteousness? As we listen to the evening news, where are these qualities to be experienced in the world in which we live? If there is bliss and happiness in this messed up world, then where on earth is it?

Obviously, Jesus is saying something here that is even more startling than what we have suspected thus far. I truthfully believe that he is telling us that if there is no bliss or happiness in our lives right now, then there is none. Whether we are rich or poor, in a state of joy or sorrow; whether we are bold or meek, filled or hungry; whether we need to be merciful or need someone to be merciful to us; whether our hearts are pure or poisoned; whether the world around us is at war or peace; whether we are being persecuted or praised—THIS IS IT! THIS IS MY LIFE TODAY! THIS IS YOUR LIFE TODAY! So, rejoice, and be glad in it.

As we understand the Beatitudes in this way, we find how they give us a picture of Jesus. His Beatitudes are a grand picture of himself. They are not mottoes. They are NOT statements. They are exclamations: they are congratulations on our present situations as Christians!

With this in mind I would like to close with a modern translation of the Beatitudes that may perhaps help us to understand what Jesus was teaching as he drew a picture of real blessedness, by describing spontaneous qualities of a grateful life:

**BLESSED AND HAPPY**
the persons who realize their poverty, their dependence upon God, and their need for the adequacy of grace. Lacking self-sufficient pride and arrogance, they are open to learn and grow and expect. Theirs is the real glory of God, the Kingdom, the "government" of God.

**BLESSED AND HAPPY**
the persons who mourn because their hearts are tender. They mourn their own condition and that of the world in which they live. These persons will really know what genuine comfort is.

**BLESSED AND HAPPY**
the meek, not the doormats, but the persons who, though strong, so commit themselves to God that they are entirely God-centered. They will be right with God, right with self, and right with others, and they will really stand and carry through to inherit the earth.

**BLESSED AND HAPPY**
those who are unsatisfied and continue to hunger for the rightness God desires on the earth.

**BLESSED AND HAPPY**
those who are kind and tender-hearted toward others. They will know what God's kindness and grace really are in their lives.

**BLESSED AND HAPPY**
those whose motives are honest and genuine. They shall have the vision of God and see God at work in and around them.

BLESSED AND HAPPY
those who work for peace and reconciliation. They are the real sons and daughters of God.

BLESSED AND HAPPY
those who get hurt for right and just causes. Their wounds are meaningful, vicarious, and redemptive marks of their citizenship in the commonwealth of God.

AMEN.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Micah 6:1-8

Both of the Old Testament lessons call us to act in accordance with the reality that we know is true. The prophet Micah makes this point through a legal confrontation between God and Israel.

Psalm 15

Psalm 15 encourages worshippers to adopt a moral way of life.

I. Corinthians 1:18-31

In the second lesson, Paul writes of the distinctive manner in which God works for salvation.

Matthew 5:1-12

With the Beatitudes, Matthew presents Jesus’ teachings about the characteristics of his disciples who are real people, living real lives in a real world.

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Epiphany 5
Date: 07 February 1999
Title: “Cutting Back on Salt and Conserving Energy”
Text: Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.” What does that mean today?

As we consider the human activities around this earth of ours, it may seem as if much of
humanity is cutting back on salt and using light bulbs with lower and lower wattages in order to conserve energy. Of course, we, personally, do not change the world by lowering our consumption of salt in our daily diets, nor do we prevent brownouts or blackouts by lowering the wattage of the light bulbs in our living rooms.

We can, however, as Christians, change the world around us, by adding some zest to life, and by bringing some light of insight into the world around us. How and why? Because, the point in this morning’s gospel lesson, is, that we, as Christians, can be a source of salt and light in the world in which we live.

When we were baptized, we "put on Christ," as the Apostle Paul might say. In worship week after week we are cleansed and renewed in our identity with Christ. The result is our personal response to the source of our salt and light as we maintain control over our lives.

Each of us has probably heard a hundred sermons on salt and an equal amount on light, but, I would suspect, that even a thousand of each would not dull or taste for salt in the food we eat and our desire for sources of light each evening as the sun sets. Salt is inconspicuous, ordinary, and mixed with countless common foods in order to make them palatable. Probably most of us can tolerate a low salt diet, because we know that it is healthy for us, but a salt-free diet--YUK!

Every once in a while, especially when Mary and I are both at work in the kitchen trying to slam dunk a quick meal after a busy day, and there are too many cooks in the kitchen, something doesn't get the salt shaker waved over it. And, YUK.

Noodles boiled without salt in the water--YUK! No matter how wonderful the food that is prepared to go over the noodles, nothing can redeem noodles. Such an oversight robs us. Likewise, we as Christians, as the salt of the earth, either redeem the world around us or the world robs us of our Christianity.

So much for the salt, what about the light? We are the light of the world. We humans shed a great deal of light. All we need to do is look out an airplane window as we fly over a city on a clear night and we know we shed a lot of light.

Recently, a TV news special pointed out that we humans waste more light than we use, and thus, waste a great deal of energy. A recent, nighttime satellite photo showed our nation glowing from illuminated cities and towns and huge metropolitan areas all across our country. No other nation in the world is lit up at night like the USA. The commentator was pointing out the fact that most of our energy used to produce light was going out into space, and that it would be much more economical to concentrate that light downward, here on earth, where people live--where it can do some good.

For what purpose should our light shine as Christians? To light up space? Or to bless others here on earth with "good works," that God may be glorified. The word "works," here, means practical helpfulness, as well as good character. Therefore, we are not talking
about pride-filled exhibitionism, such as that of one of my neighbors, who, every Christmas, floods his house with enough energy to illuminate the entire town. Shining for God is different: it is more down to earth. It takes group responsibility as well as individual responsibility. It is serious business: It calls for the light of lighthouses, not the light of billboards.

In much of our earthly lives we need to conserve: less salt may be healthier in our diets, and the conservation of energy benefits all, but not in the life of faith. As Christians we are free to add as much zest to life as we can, and to turn on all the lights that will make the world glow for God.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

ISAIAH 58:1-9A: The first lesson underscores the importance of integrating faith into all aspects of our lives.

PSALM 112:1-9: Psalm 112 could be read as an extension of the first lesson, as it praises ethical action that flows from worship.

I. CORINTHIANS 2:1-12: In the second lesson Paul continues to argue against the spiritual boasting of the fundamentalistic Corinthians.

MATTHEW 5:13-20: In the wake of the Beatitudes, Matthew offers a collection of the sayings of Jesus to explicate the meaning of discipleship.

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Epiphany 6
Date: 14 February 1999
Title: “The Practical Shape of Behavior and Piety” or “Salvation Is Free Only After the Bills Are Paid”
Text: Matthew 5:21-37

Today marks one of the great holidays of the commercial world. Anyone can be a valentine these days: spouses, of course, but also family members, friends, students, teachers, neighbors. There aren't too many restrictions nowadays.

Even though the mythical martyr of third century Rome lost his sainthood decades ago, because, along with St. Christopher, no one could actually prove that such a person ever lived, a day remains in his honor, at least to the point of maintaining his name. The commercial market for Valentine's Day in America seems to be limitless, just as the other commercial celebrations, beginning in the fall with Halloween, then Christmas, (the harvest season is now ignored in most stores), then Valentine's Day, then Easter, then Mother's Day, and, of course, the fourth of July.
And each commercial holiday has its colors.

During the past week I have thought that the pink and red hues of Valentine's Day also may reflect this year the faces of many embarrassed congressmen and congresswomen, as they have been involved in the impeachment trial, and of everyone else's embarrassment, from the president to each and every lowly citizen. If the impeachment madness is over, and I am not so sure that it is, but, if it is, then I thank God that it is over.

Today's gospel lesson throws some interesting light on the dynamics of the impeachment drama, as it conveys the practical shape of behavior and piety in situations of conflict. “You think murder is wrong,” said Jesus, “well anger is just as bad, and if you so much as insult someone, your are liable to judgment.” The strong feeling burning in Jesus’ words shows the sharpness of the issue.

“You think adultery is wrong, well lust is just as bad.” This seems to put President Carter in the same league as President Clinton. Do you remember Mr. Carter's embarrassing interview with Play Boy Magazine, when he, as President, admitted that he had from time to time felt lust in his heart?

During the Senate trial we heard the term sexual McCarthyism, as certain people pointed out President Clinton's human frailties while ignoring their own, only to be similarly embarrassed--Mr. Hyde and Mr. Livingston both, evidently, are adulterers--and I use the term embarrassment, because I think we all have been embarrassed by the impeachment trial.

The whole soap opera of the impeachment proceedings was a tremendously embarrassing show of the behavior of human beings, who, although the outward and observable behavior of those involved may have been much worse than that of others, it was certainly not much different from that of anyone else when it came to their inner attitudes and motives toward other people.

Jesus said, murder is wrong, but so is anger; so is insulting someone; so are sneers and casual indifference that regard people as less than who they are in the sight of God. He affirmed that adultery is wrong, but so is lust. Just because one is done with the whole body and the other is done only with the mind, doesn't mean there is any difference as far as one's inner attitudes and motives are concerned.

The point is, that when it comes to keeping harmony in this world, in our nation, in our communities, in our families, our inner attitudes and motives are just as critical as our outward observable behavior. Adultery is bad, but so is lusting in one's heart, and so is sexual harassment, which is somewhere in between the two, because the attitudes and motives as well as the resulting behavior are wrong. We Christians are to live in a covenant relationship--that is the basis of human belonging. We are not only responsible for our own actions but we are also responsible for the good of all. Our actions are more than just what we want to do. Our actions are to be actions of which our spouses, our children, our
grandchildren, our brothers and sisters, our fellow church members and fellow citizens as well as all humanity and above all, God, can be proud. That is what it means to love others as we love ourselves. We are interested enough in their welfare, that our actions are affected by that concern. To love God with all my heart and with all my mind and with all my strength, is to recognize that what I do carries a much larger role than simple self satisfaction.

So much then, for the first part of today's gospel lesson. What about the rest?

When I read verses 33 through 36 in today's lesson about vows and making oaths and sworn testimony, this also causes me to reflect on the impeachment trial. Jesus’ conclusion is to simply answer questions about important matters with a simple yes or no. Did you lie under oath? Well, not really. Yes or no!

Of course, then the trial went on into the area of exactly what was being lied about: as if that were the only issue. If we should apply what Jesus says in today's lesson directly, however, how should anyone answer the question of the court, "Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" What about oaths, and truthfulness in speech? The words "I swear" are still incriminating, and "yes" and "no" similarly are capable of committing the speaker. Do you know that, historically, the early Congregationalists in our country and Quakers and others refused to take oaths? To the question asked by the court they would simply reply, "I do so affirm." They would not say, "I swear" and they would not answer yes to the question, "do you swear," because of this passage from the gospel. They simply affirmed that they would do their best to tell the truth. To do otherwise was to either lie or rely upon false powers.

During the trial, I was also interested in different reflections that were made on the topic of judgment. The nature of judgment often preoccupies us. The impeachment process--no matter what our personal opinions are about the behavior of those involved or even about their attitudes or motives--the process proved this point beyond a doubt. Everyone involved in the process was undeniably preoccupied with judgment, and, as a result, we might conclude that they all were wrong. Why? Primarily because the harmony of society was shattered by what they did because of the way they did it. The legalism, the judgmental posturing, the anger, the insults, the sneers, the contempt, the sense of the law being carried to extremes, made salvation impossible.

Yes, thank God it’s over. And thank God we Christians have a law that imposes positive obligations of spirit and deed that gives us forgiveness and power to obey God's law—the law of Christ that searches our hearts. This is God's Valentine message for us, to love one another, because God sends his very best, Jesus Christ, not just a card.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
The first lesson is a call for Israel to choose life in the land over death in the wilderness, and thus to enter God's new world.

Psalm 119:1-8

Psalm 119 provides encouragement for the worshiper, who has left the wilderness and entered the land, to persevere in walking on God's roads in God's world.

I. Corinthians 3:1-9

The second lesson speaks about genuine spirituality, and, as with the gospel lesson, confronts false claims and makes assertions about the nature of authentic faith.

Matthew 5:21-37

The gospel lesson is concerned with true righteousness.

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Ash Wednesday
Date: 17 February 1999
Homily
Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

This evening, we gather together as a community of faith that is beginning a pilgrimage through the season of Lent to Easter. Fortunately, we will not need to travel with American Airlines. We will need to have and practice a genuine concern for each other. We will express this special concern in several ways this evening: through prayer, through the celebration of Holy Communion, and through the imposition of ashes.

Through the years, some people have asked me, "What do you burn to make the ashes," as if I might smudge some kind of toxic waste on their foreheads? I traditionally use the palm leaves from the previous Palm Sunday. I will tell you that a number of times during my ministry, a helpful church custodian or church member or secretary, has removed my dried-up bunch of palms from my office and thrown them in the trash, not knowing why I saved them. Needless to say, I had a serious problem on Ash Wednesday if I didn’t have any good ash producing materials.

Using the palms from Palm Sunday for ashes is an ancient Christian custom and is practiced by many churches. It provides a practical answer to the question of what should I do with the palms that have had a religious character imposed upon them. It also communicates on a deeper level a truth about the transient nature of earthly joys. As a matter of practicality, the ashes from palm leaves are, fortunately, also rather sticky, so they stick well when smeared on foreheads.
A number of years ago, I shared an Ash Wednesday service with a minister from another denomination, who had never used ashes before. Since the service was to be held at her church, she supplied the ashes. Unfortunately, she did not know about the fine qualities of palm leaf soot, so she produced, instead, a stinking pile of cigarette ashes, which were very dry and flaky and did not serve our purposes very well, at all.

(By the way, in the West foyer, there is dish of water and a roll of paper towels so that you may remove the ashes after the service if you so wish.)

Besides being a symbol of repentance, and a reminder of our mortality, the ashes tonight might also emphasize the things that really matter in our lives, as we find them described in the gospel lesson. There, Jesus’ words are more than practical advice about piety; they are a strong directive to give God first-place in our lives, so that God's concerns become our concerns. This line of thought elaborates and helps us understand the difficult words of Jesus that immediately precede tonight's text: "Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48) "Be perfect." That is a big order.

I often remind my dear wife, Mary, that I am not perfect. She, in turn, quite frequently, reminds me that I am not perfect. She may also remind me that she is not perfect. At that point, I may reply with something like, "Well, you were when I married you, so, what happened?"

“I'm only human. I'm only one person. I only have two hands. I can only do one thing at a time. I can only be in one place at once. There are only so many hours in a day.”

“O.K., I understand, but what else is new?”

That's not the point, of course. The point, this evening, is to give God first-place in our lives, so that God's concerns become our concerns. Then, we are on our way to perfection.

Therefore, I beg you to meditate on the words of Jesus this evening. Listen to his directives to the modesty of true devotion, and then go forth into this evening with the sign of the cross on your forehead knowing that God's causes are ours. Then, these ashes that are bonded to our foreheads as a sign of repentance, may also be a sign of the cross of Christ that has become the true character of our very selves.

Let us pray.

Father in heaven, the light of your truth bestows sight to the darkness of sinful eyes. May this season of repentance bring us the blessing of your forgiveness and the gift of your light, that your causes may be ours. Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES
JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17: The first lesson explores the themes of sin and death that are central to Ash Wednesday. Here the prophet Joel proclaims the judgment of God on sin.

PSALM 103

II. CORINTHIANS 5:20b-6:10: Paul's words to the Corinthians inform them that those doing God's will live faultlessly before others, but they do not necessarily make a smooth impression on people.

MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21: The passages from the gospel lesson give directions for practicing one's piety. They both warn against using piety to make an impression on others and admonish the practice of true devotion.

*Lent 1*

Date: 22 February 1999
Title: “Saying Good-Bye to Old Adam”
Text: Romans 5:12-19

My topic this morning is Paul's contrast between Adam and Christ. Adam represents sin and humanity's condemnation, while Christ represents righteousness and humanity's acquittal. Humanity's old ways of sin, disobedience, and death are set against the realities of the new creation: righteousness, obedience, and life. The old order of things was driven by the power of sin, or opposition to and isolation from God, but the new order, manifested in Christ, operates by the power of grace, or compliance, and connection with God's will.

This is wonderful, but what does it mean?

If we are to reduce human nature to analyzable quantities, it can be understood as presenting two sides: 1. A lower, physical side, shared with other animals, and 2. A higher side.

Personally, I like to make the contrast between Adam I. and Adam II., or between the Old Adam and the New Adam, rather than between the biblical Adam and the biblical Christ, so that I myself can understand the contrast.

Inside most human bodies is a person of dust and a person of heaven: A Mr. or Ms. Hyde, and a Mr. or Ms. Jeckle. We bear the first by nature, and can reach it through mere instinct. We bear the second by choice, and reach it through faith and reason.

Paul makes this contrast in his argument, but he does another interesting thing. Beside the way he contrasts the physical and the spiritual, and the fact that Paul often takes for granted the things that really need to be argued, a study of this text from Romans makes it very clear that Paul was writing about human nature--about the tremendous range of human nature, and its overwhelming and immense capacity for good.
Any honest study of human nature, needs to tackle both sides of human nature seriously, because God did not place us in this world in two separate packages, one physical, the other spiritual, with a set of instructions on how the contents of both packages should be mixed or analyzed. God dropped the complete package, intact. And, as it is said, "what God has joined together, let no human put asunder."

Thus we are still confronted with the conflict--with the irreconcilable hostility that continually smolders and whispers mutiny in the human conscience--that continually pits the ancient savage against the potential sin that dwells in every person.

The famous preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, called this conflict the problem of combating the caveman within. In these enlightened times we may include the cavewoman within. You see, we are not talking about people with split personalities here. We are talking about you and me.

How do we use Adam II? Perhaps only to restrain Adam I! So it is that while there are very few savages around us, there are, by the same token, very few saints.

As a minister of Jesus Christ, I find this very puzzling. If there are so many people who say they are Christians, why are there so few changes taking place for the good? Whenever a person earnestly seeks to carry on the good will of another, he or she reflects the image of that person. Therefore, if there are so many Christians around, where is that image; where is the image of Christ?

Well, God only knows we are doing the best we can. If both sinner and saint are made of the same stuff, however, what makes the difference?

In the gospel lesson this morning, we find Jesus tempted just like anyone else. Consider, though, how he used his instincts, and his determination, and his ambition, and we clearly realize that he never trampled or cast out what so many of his followers would call primitive instincts. He used them. He organized them around NEW purposes and new aims.

Consider his ambition! Ambition is a primitive instinct that can have ruinous meanings. It can also be a great starting point for a great career and a great life. It is a matter of organization and focus.

An ambitious businessperson may choose to organize his or her energies to become the richest person in town, or he may direct them to make that business a blessing to all who work there, himself included. It is a matter of willpower.

So many times, however, people reflect the image of a person I read about, who, when asked by his pastor, "Shall I give you something to strengthen your willpower?," replied, "NO, just give me something to weaken my conscience."
We need always to strengthen our willpower, because we need always to deal with the fact that our Old Adam--our primitive instincts are too valuable to throw away. They are meant to be energized, refined, developed, reorganized, and redirected.

Even one of our most base instincts, including our combative spirit, upon which survival used to depend, which we still have, can have great meaning. We might find examples of such combativeness in our own backyards.

Sometime ago, I read of a cheerful truck driver--a big man, who pulled into a small town like Riceville one night. It was late, and he did not know the area, but he was hungry. So, he pulled his rig up to the curb in front of a local tavern. He went into the sparsely populated bar, and was pleasantly surprised with a good meal. Halfway through his dinner, however, three wild-looking, drunk motorcyclists roared up--bearded, leather-jacketed, with swastikas adorning their exposed hairy chests and gracing their caps. For no reason at all, they selected the truck driver as a target. One poured salt and pepper on his head. Another stole his pie and ate it. The third deliberately upset his coffee.

The trucker never said a word--just got up, paid his check and left.

One of the bikers looked out over the sparse bar crowd, and sneered, "That so-and-so sure ain't much of a fighter."

The bartender, who was peering out the front window, added, "Yep, and he don't seem to be much of a driver either, 'cause he just backed his eighteen wheeler right over three motorcycles."

Idealists have often suppressed Old Adam, and cursed him, and cast him out. Jesus showed his followers that Old Adam is not to be crushed or crippled or cast out, but converted. Old Adam is not to be repressed, but redeemed.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

GENESIS 2:15-17; 3:1-7

The familiar story about exposed nakedness in the Garden of Eden explores the consequences of sin for all humans and for the Creation itself.

PSALM 32

Psalm 32 shows us how to petition for God's grace, even when we are all too aware of our weakness and shame.

ROMANS 5:12-19
In the second lesson, Adam is interpreted as an antitype for Jesus, that is, Adam personifies the sin-flawed old creation, and Jesus embodies the perfect new creation.

MATTHEW 4:1-11

In the gospel lesson, Jesus relives the story of Moses and Israel in the wilderness and of all of us, as temptations invite us to use God rather than to be used by God.


Lent 2
Date: 28 February 1999
Title: “Faith As Gift”
Text: John 3:1-17

Are you a born-again Christian?

What does it mean to be born AGAIN?

Obviously, when Jesus told Nicodemus that Nicodemus needed to be born again, Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant. Even today, many Christians do not understand what Jesus meant, which is amazing to me, because this passage from scripture itself points out the misunderstanding and explains it.

First of all, the idea of rebirth runs all through the New Testament. Peter speaks of it. James speaks of it. The Letter to Titus mentions it. Paul addresses the subject at great length with all his words about dying with Christ and the rising to life anew. Paul also speaks of those who have just come into the Christian faith, that is, those who have just been born again, as babes in Christ. In other words, according to Paul, being born again is not a final act; it is only A BEGINNING FOR BEGINNERS. "In Christ there is a new creation," wrote Paul in his letter to the Galatians. In Hebrews we read again of new Christians as babies. All over the New Testament, this idea of rebirth and re-creation occurs. But, wherever we find it, it is always presented as a beginning, and never as an end in itself.

So, are you a born-again Christian? Am I? Well, if it means only that I am a beginner, then I guess my answer is “yes.”

Unfortunately, many Christians still misinterpret the term just as Nicodemus misinterpreted it.

Nicodemus was a very interesting man. He was wealthy. He was a Pharisee. He was also a puzzled man. Something was lacking in his life, but he obviously did not know what was lacking. When Nicodemus came to Jesus one night, he said to Jesus that no one could help but be impressed with the signs and the wonders that Jesus did. Jesus’ reply was that it was not the signs and the wonders that were really important; the important
thing was that Nicodemus needed to change his life, and that such a change in a person's inner life could only be described as a new birth. But the word Jesus used to describe the change confused Nicodemus. The word we translate into English as "born again," is rather ambiguous in the original Greek. It could mean, "born again," but it would more likely mean, born “from above.” It can also mean born "from the beginning, or born "completely," or born "radically." That is, the New Testament Greek can mean all of these. But, in the Aramaic language, which Jesus spoke, this term can mean only born "from above," that is, born "from God." Perhaps that is the reason why Nicodemus misunderstood what Jesus was saying. Jesus said what Jesus thought meant born "from above," but Nicodemus's Greek and Aramaic were a little weak and, therefore, Nicodemus heard "born again," and Nicodemus misinterpreted what Jesus was saying.

You see, Nicodemus thought he could change his life from below.

This past Thursday, as I waited for Mary to recover from her surgery, I read through the Thursday New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and my new copy of the Atlantic Monthly, in that order. In the Atlantic, I read an amazing article written by a theologian, titled, "The Market As God."

The New York Times has always represented to me what a newspaper should be, if a person has most of every day to read it. The Wall Street Journal, upon the other hand, has always seemed to me to be an uneasy marriage between the world's finest business reporting and, in the editorial section, the world's worst crackpot journalism. On Thursday, however, after reading the entire contents of the three publications I just mentioned, I realized that the Atlantic writer made a great deal of sense. The publications of the business world, namely the Wall Street Journal, "bear a striking resemblance" to the literature of the Bible. The market, we are assured, possesses divine attributes. They are not always completely evident to us mortals, but they must be trusted and affirmed by faith.

The market, we are told, is able to determine what human needs are, what copper and capital should cost, how much barbers and CEOs should be paid, and how much jet planes, running shoes, and surgeries should cost. But how do we know the market's will?

Well, the market is embodied in a bull or a bear. It must be fed and kept happy under all circumstances, just like an ancient god. Sometimes, its appetite may seem excessive--a $35 billion bailout here, and a $50 billion bailout there--but the alternative to assuaging its hunger is too terrible to contemplate.

Like the market, the traditional God of Protestant prayer is often invoked as one “unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.” Like a biblical god, THE MARKET already knows the deepest secrets and darkest desires of our hearts--or at least would like to know them.

But one suspects, I am certain, that divine motivation differs in these two cases, because one is from above, and one is from here below.
Nicodemus was a “below” person. He wanted to experience salvation, but on his own terms, from below. He thought he had to be “born again.” He did not know that he had to be born “from above.”

If we can be born from below, well, then, free enterprise is all we need. The Market makes available the religious benefits that once required prayer and fasting, without, of course, the awkwardness of denominational commitment or the tedious ascetic discipline that once limited their accessibility.

Nicodemus was a truly fortunate man, obviously born-again “from below.” But he was a puzzled man. He wanted to be changed, but he also knew that he could not change himself.

(pause)

So, one night, he came to Jesus for a talk.

Let us pray.

God our heavenly Father, help us to hear clearly what your Son is saying, that we may receive new life. Enlighten us with your Word, that we may find the way to your glory, which is a gift “from above.” We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

GENESIS 12:1-4a

The first lesson deals with the theme of God's divine promise of life and blessing.

PSALM 121

Psalm 121 is a song of praise to God for the gift of peace and salvation, which gives encouragement to the worshiper to seek the security of God's grace.

ROMANS 4:1-5, 13-17

The second reading from Romans forms a parallel to the first lesson from Genesis: both texts focus on Abraham and present him as a model of faith.

JOHN 3:1-17

The gospel lesson presents an encounter between Nicodemus, a religious leader, and Jesus. Evidently, Nicodemus came to Jesus to confirm certain conclusions that some people were forming as they observed Jesus.

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It was high noon, and it was hot. Jesus and a small group of his followers had been traveling for hours, and they were exhausted and hungry. Jesus sat on a wellhead to rest. This was not just the wellhead of any old well, but the famous well of Samaria, thought to have been dug by Jacob, whose tomb was nearby. Can we picture Jesus sitting on the wellhead? Can we sense the heat of noonday in that land? Can we understand how thirsty and hungry he might have been?

The scene reminds me of a song that Mary and I used to sing with Allen on a very hot day, when he was young. It is a Southern song about popcorn:

Too pooped to pop,
And I ain't lyin',
Too pooped to pop,
Just a layin' here an’ fryin',
Gotta get off the bottom,
Gotta get up on top.
O Lord, I’m just too pooped to pop.

Where was Jesus? As far as a Jew of his day was concerned, he was in the middle of nowhere, that is, nowhere any respectable Jew would be. The Jews hated the Samaritans. The Samaritans were descendants of the Israelites of the northern Kingdom, but they had intermarried with non-Jews. That is something true Jews do not do. Even today, if a son or daughter of a very conservative, Orthodox Jewish family marries a non-Jew, the family has a funeral service for the son or daughter.

After the exile in Babylonia, the Samaritans had their own temple, but, about a century before Christ, the Jews tore it down, because they believed that God could be worshipped only in Jerusalem.

The land of Palestine in Jesus’ day was only about 120 miles long from north to south, about as far as Ames is from Riceville, or Des Moines is from Nashua. But within those 120 miles, there were three definite divisions of territory. To the north was Galilee; to the south was Judea, and in between was Samaria.

Evidently, Jesus had become embroiled in a controversy about baptism in Judea, and he decided to move his operations to Galilee. He also decided to take the short cut through Samaria, which could be done in three days, rather than go around Samaria, and have to cross the Jordan River twice, thus making the trip twice as long. On the way, he and his followers came to the famous fork in the road just short of the town of Sychar where there is to this day a well that is known as Jacob's well.

Lent 3
Date: 07 March 1999
Title: “An Unwinding Conversation”
Text: John 4:5-42
This was an area that had many Jewish memories attached to it. Here Jacob bought a piece of ground, and on his deathbed bequeathed that ground to Joseph. When Joseph died in Egypt, his body was taken back to Palestine and was buried on this same ground.

When Jesus and his friends came to the famous fork in the road, Jesus sat down to rest. His disciples went on into town to buy some food. Jesus was too tired to go with them, so he sat on the wellhead. Then along came a Samaritan woman.

Why this woman came to the well is something of a mystery. The well was more than a half-mile from town. Village women would usually gather water in town in the coolness of the early evening, and linger at the watering place to share gossip and the news of the day. Why was this woman alone in a lonely place under the baking noonday sun? Was she such a moral outcast that she dared to draw water only when no one else was around?

Evidently, Jesus had nothing to draw water with, so he took the opportunity to ask the woman to give him a drink. But Samaritans and Jews did not speak to each other, so the woman was greatly surprised that he spoke to her.

What a scene! Jesus was wearied; he was too pooped to pop, too tired even to go with his disciples to buy food; he was glad to rest, alone in a place of historical memories, alone with God. And, then, along comes Monica Lewinski.

There are few stories in the gospels that show us so much about the character of Jesus, as this story does. He is so human here, so weary of the road—exhausted. In the fourth gospel, John usually stresses the divinity of Jesus, not his humanity. Why then do we find here someone struggling with his humanity just as we struggle? Why is Jesus’ life just as big an effort as ours?

John shows us a person who was dead tired, but who also had to go on. Then along comes a woman, and John shows us the warmth and sympathy of Jesus. The barriers between Jews and Samaritans were broken down for an instant. Here was God so loving the world, not in theory, but in action. The woman was shocked. First of all, as I already mentioned, Jews did not speak to Samaritans. Second, no man, especially a Rabbi, would speak so familiarly with any woman. Surprised, the woman tried to use her religion as a shield, but it did not work. Jesus was not to be deflected by side issues. He answered her briefly, and, evidently, she caught the vision of God that Jesus reflected. Then she faced herself and saw herself as she really was. She was amazed at Jesus’ understanding. And she went off to share her discovery.

The actions of this woman have much to tell us about real Christian experience. When we meet Jesus Christ, our first instincts might be to say to others, “Look at what I was, and look at what I am now. This is what Christ has done for me.”

Let us pray.
Heavenly Father, you have taught us to overcome our sins by prayer and by works of mercy. When we are discouraged by our weakness, give us confidence in your love. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

EXODUS 17:1-7

Both the first lesson and Psalm 95 seek to answer the question, is the Lord in our midst, or not? The motif to answer that question in the first lesson, is the miraculous gift of water in the wilderness.

PSALM 95

Psalm 95 provides commentary on the wilderness story, shifting from the wilderness to worship, and cautioning us about testing the presence of God in the midst of worship itself.

ROMANS 5:1-11

The second lesson presents a tough piece of Paul's theology in the form of a meditation on justification. The main concern of this section of Romans is the life of the Christian community, especially in its experience of grace.

JOHN 4:5-42 (5-15, 19-26, 39-42)

The gospel lesson is a beautiful, elaborate narrative that is structured much like the one about Jesus and Nicodemus. Narrative leads to conversation as scenes and characters come and go, and the identity of Jesus Christ is revealed.

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Lent 4
(One Great Hour of Sharing Special Mission Offering for the United Church of Christ)
Date: 14 March 1999
Title: “Fifty Great Hours”
Text: Mark 16:15

Jesus said to his followers, "Go into all the world." (Mark 16:15)

One Great Hour of Sharing is fifty years young today, and going stronger than ever, helping more people than ever throughout the world. In 1949, gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing reached needy people in only a handful of countries. Today, as we worship, OGHS is touching lives of persons in more than 70 countries. In 1949, gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing provided only stopgap aid to victims of war and the consequences of war. Today OGHS responds with sustained support to a variety of human needs: refugee resettlement,
As I have studied the work that is supported by this unique, inter-faith offering, I am inspired and moved to think of all the lives that have been touched by this offering since 1949. Every gift to One Great Hour of Sharing makes a difference. Less than five percent of this offering goes to overhead. Thus, over 95% goes directly to missions. And it gets there, too, because the United Church of Christ works with local church partners, not governments. These Christian partners are at the scene of the earthquake, or the hurricane, or the water project. They know how to use resources effectively, and they let God's love shine forth as they do so. Our gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing are channeled through our own UCC Office of Global Sharing of Resources and also through Church World Service. Whether it is emergency relief for flood victims here in the Midwestern United States, as in 1993, or people in Florida who lost their homes in wildfires, or people in Turkey who lost their homes in earthquakes, or assistance to refugees in Southern Africa, or technical aid to attack persistent poverty in Asia or Latin America, or aid to children in Cambodia who lost their legs in land mine explosions, or buying baby chicks for a family that has just reclaimed its farm in Bosnia, or covering the cost of polio vaccinations for children in Nicaragua, One Great Hour of Sharing continues to be in the forefront, helping marginalized people to improve their lives.

The words of church leaders who promoted One Great Hour of Sharing in 1949 instruct us still: "This nationwide united effort by America's Christians (I would add that Canadian churches are now also involved.) has an importance far beyond the practical goal of fund raising, for this great joint program will not only strengthen the important relief and rehabilitation work of the churches overseas, but it will prove to all the world how great is the power generated when Christians unite in a common cause."

Our generosity toward others in the new millennium and in the new century will determine what kind of world we will leave our children and generations to come. In 1949, the world's population was 2.5 billion; it now approaches 6 billion. As the challenge increases, so must the resolve.

Therefore, it is good to know that today we have one more opportunity, the fifty-first in North America, to reach beyond our grasp to give help, to give hope, to give life and to follow Jesus’ command to "go into all the world." And, that is a very wonderful opportunity.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

I. Samuel 16:1-13

The first lesson is the account of the anointing of David by Samuel and explores what it means to be anointed by God.

Psalm 23
Psalm 23 is a prayer song in which the worshiper who has experienced threatening events also experiences the security of God through anointing.

Ephesians 5:8-14

In the second lesson the author addresses Christian behavior of the time but affirms Christ's crucial role in the Christian life.

John 9:1-41

Today we once again look at a long story from the gospel of John. Basically, this healing story offers rich implications for the way Christians perceive their lives.

*Lent 5
Date: 21 March 1999
Title: “The Power of the Divine Word”
Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is one of the most vivid in all scripture. The setting, of course, is the exile in Babylon. The Jews are a displaced people, who have lost their land, their livelihood, their national identity, and, most seriously, their faith. Their God, after all, had promised them life in the Promised Land as the fulfillment of the salvation that was wrought out of the Exodus. In exile, however, they now find themselves to be a wilderness people again.

Before we get too involved in the story, however, let us play around with the vision just a little. It is one of my favorites.

During my seminary years, I was a student assistant minister in a church that had a large and very active youth ministry. Each year the youth group had a retreat at the Connecticut Conference retreat house on Fishers Island, served by a ferry steamer out of New London, Connecticut. The island is actually New York State territory, and, except for this one property, is a very exclusive, private summer community.

Because of the island's strategic importance, large gun emplacements were built on the island during the first and second world wars to protect the New London harbor and the submarine base. In one of the largest underground bunkers, those who frequented the retreat house maintained a primitive, windowless chapel, with a cross made of driftwood, and a large, old table for an altar, on which two candles provided the only light. The venue was intended to re-create the feeling of the earliest Christians who met secretly to worship in the catacombs of Rome.
I was in charge of the worship service that year. We approached the bunker after supper as the sun was going down, and we entered the catacomb chapel with flashlights.

I then asked everyone to turn off the flashlights as I lit just one candle on the altar. I introduced my topic concerning hope and God's gift of the Spirit, and then I read this chapter from Ezekiel. The single candle cast an incredible collection of shadows on the walls, and, as I read about the rattling bones, the shifting shadows of the youth seemed to move closer and closer together.

I will share with you that we ended our eerie worship experience with everyone lighting his or her own candle to symbolize the light of hope and the light of God's Spirit and the light of Christ, and we sang about bringing that light into the world, and the room was ablaze with light as we left, and we processed out into the calm, dark night with our candles literally bringing light into the darkness around us. A nice finish, yes, but what I remember most were the squirming shadows, moving closer and closer in the light of that one candle.

The classic Interpreters Bible introduces Ezekiel's vision with awesome and amazing clarity:

The opening section for the chapter is among the most important in the whole Bible, and the preacher will turn to it again and again, so rich in suggestion and inspiration is it. We have here one of those instances in which what seemed at the time only a wild flight of imagination has been amply substantiated by the course of events. We stand at a point at which the power of God actually breaks into history and gives it a new direction.

Why does the Interpreter's Bible make such a big deal out of this passage? Well, think of the vision. Think of the images. I recall in the motion picture, "The Killing Fields," which portrayed the horrifying genocide in Cambodia, the shocking scene along the riverbed where dry bones are protruding out of the sandy shoreline: hundreds of bones, thousands, tens of thousands, perhaps. So it was that Ezekiel compared his hopeless, exiled people to the dry bones of an actual battlefield. Judah had struggled against Babylon and the Jews were crushed. The great valley in Judah, where the last battle was fought, was scattered with disinterred bones--symbols of dashed hopes, and the desperate situation of those who survived only to be dragged off into slavery. And God says to the prophet, I want you to go preach to those bones. ("Them bones, them bones, them dry bones"--remember the old spiritual?)

Now, I take my calling to the ministry seriously, and I have accepted God's call to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ as best I can, and I have preached to many and various congregations, but, certainly not to a congregation like Ezekiel's.

"Mortal, can these bones live," asks God?

"God only knows," replies Ezekiel.
"Go preach to those bones," says God. "Say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word for God.'"

And Ezekiel preached to the bones, and suddenly there was a rattling.

Perhaps the most amazing part of this story is that Ezekiel is no mere spectator of the miracle. He is the agent of change. Through him, the mortal, not God, the transformation was affected. "Go preach to those bones," commanded God. He, Ezekiel, was to speak the Word of God where there was no one to hear it. The Word of God would create its own hearers. Even after all the hopes of the Jewish people had perished—all the appearances of hope had perished—he, Ezekiel, was to continue as before. He was not to abandon his mission just because there seemed to be no hope for success. His fidelity alone would release new powers that would bring new life to his people.

Who among us here this morning has not stood at some time or other by a pile of dead hopes? Who has not faced a situation in which any possibility of recovery seemed to be ruled out in advance?

Just last week, a friend of mine in Nashua was diagnosed with colon cancer and had radical surgery to save his life. He and his wife had been on a long-awaited vacation in Las Vegas where he became suddenly ill. So, they canceled the vacation, and came back home, and now he is in Rochester. At such times we can appreciate the message of Ezekiel's vision. It speaks to us of a God who can achieve more than we can imagine. But there is still work for us to do. As with the surgeons who operated on my friend, we too are agents through whom transformations are affected. We are they who must cling to our faith, continue our work, and keep the vision. Our lives are filled with the imponderable, and the incalculable. These situations may seem at first sight to be only accident, or chance, but a deeper discernment sees in them the signs of a creative and revolutionizing power from God, if we keep the vision.

God's Spirit is not ours to command, but it is given to us when we are faithful.

I recall one of my colleagues in seminary who took great pride in the fact that he needed to spend very little time on sermon preparation. One day, in preaching class, our professor shared a few harsh words with the class about our colleague's apparent lack of preparation. My colleague confessed, in front of God and everybody, that he usually carefully wrote out the first part of his sermon, but that he routinely left the rest to the Spirit. Our professor then commented that he had thought the introduction to the sermon was fine. As far as the rest of the sermon was concerned, however, perhaps the Spirit was just having a bad day.

As believers, we must not only keep up the hope, we must also keep up the work, and, then, we will keep the vision.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

EZEKIEL 37:1-14
The first lesson, which is my sermon text for the morning, is the eerie story of the dried and wind-blown bones that sprang back to life as though we were watching a motion picture in reverse. It reminds me of the joke about the country western singer and recording star, who, as he listened to his song being played backwards, got his dog back, and his truck back, and his girl back.

PSALM 130

Psalm 130 is a penitential prayer.

ROMANS 8:6-11

Both of the New Testament readings are concerned about life--the new life of believers in Christ, which is a major Lenten theme.

JOHN 11:1-45

Once again we have a long passage from the gospel of John. Once again I will abbreviate it, but I do commend it to you in its entirety. We have here another miracle story with description. Here we find Jesus as the source for life--specifically, eternal life--and an existence greater than life. This life in Christ is ours personally, but it also draws us into community and discipleship.

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Palm / Passion Sunday
Date: 28 March 1999
Title: “What God Would Do”

The tone of Palm Sunday is set by the crowd, which gathered on that joyful day. But the exuberance and the drama of that day fail to displace an undertone within the gospel accounts of that day.

It will be my task this morning to reconcile, as best I can, the tone and the undertone of Palm Sunday.

There were Hosannas that day--Hosannas saved for centuries, for that one day--and there were beatitudes shouted--"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"--that had only been murmured before. And there were branches thrown in the path of the king. That was the tone.

But there was also the haunting undertone: the haunting history of Jerusalem, which, through the centuries, had destroyed every prophet who ever dared to trespass within the city walls. Jerusalem was not a bad city as cities were in Jesus’ day. Jewish citizens who had problems had recourse. A person could take civil complaints to the Sanhedrin, the nation's
high court, and usually get a fair trial. One could take criminal or political complaints to the Roman Procurator, and usually get a fair hearing. One could also take certain complaints to the puppet king, in this case, Herod, and have a hearing. But it was another matter, entirely, for a prophet to take his prophecy to Jerusalem. Historically, that meant only one thing—the demise of the prophet. Jesus knew that. Jesus knew the history of his people. He also knew their needs, and he knew their most sincere desires.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that the writers of the gospels preserved both the tone and the undertone of the Palm Sunday story: the tone set by Jesus’ understanding of the needs and sincere desires of his people, and the undertone set by recalling Jerusalem’s history.

The writers of the gospels are very careful as they direct their blame for what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem. The blame is placed not on the citizens, but, rather, on their leaders. Jesus represented the needs and the sincere desires of the people, but the political leaders did not. Then, as today, there was a gap—a great gap—an abyss—between the people and their leaders.

As we review the news coverage of the struggle in what was Yugoslavia, we realize there is still a great gap between the needs and sincere desires of the people in that former republic and their political leaders, namely president Slobodan Milosevic. The governments of Western nations, especially the nineteen nations who belong to NATO, have finally decided to do something, instead of nothing, to end the persecution of ethnic groups, especially the persecution of Muslims by the Serbians. But a great gap still exists, because the political leaders have decided to use bombs and missiles, and, as more than one commentator has noted, no amount of bombs and missiles is going to prevent Serbian police and militia from entering Kosovo schools and homes and shooting everyone they find inside. No one will be saved from the terror there until there are people on the ground helping to meet the needs and sincere desires of the people in Kosovo. This of course is the reason why the negotiators insisted on a peacekeeping force in Kosovo—a people presence. And yet, not one of the nineteen nations involved in the attack on the Serbians will commit ground troops in order to invade the region. Why, because they do not want their sons coming back home in body bags. Therefore, the bombs and rockets will have to do.

How can God work when there is such a great gap between what God would do for his people and what God's people would not do because of the decisions made by their leaders?

What about persecution in other areas of the world? Take Sudan, for instance, the largest country in Africa. Nearly two million people have died there, compared to Bosnia's 300,000 and Kosovo's 1,000. And most of the dead were from southern Sudan, which is Christian. They were killed by northern Sudanese when they refused to convert to Islam. In Rwanda nearly one million have died in civil war. No politicians of international repute are doing anything about that. And yet, the world around us is made up of persons pretty much like you and me. We, you and I, and people like us throughout the world, KNOW that we are certainly not responsible for what the world around us has become. We Christians, however, also know that we, as human beings, are the only ones who can change this world into what
it ought to be. Political leaders are not going to do it; they never have and they never will. Bombs are not going to do it, either.

What then are our chances as the only ones who can make the change?

Have you ever noticed that even in our better moments on our better days, our good thoughts and our good deeds can go completely unappreciated by others, just like those of Jesus? And yet, we know that those good deeds and thoughts are the only hope God has on this earth today, and that the good things of God will continue to be unreceived until our good spirit and our good deeds prevail.

When we understand that, then we find harmony between the tone and the undertone of Palm Sunday.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 50:4-9a

The Old Testament Lesson explores the call of the suffering servant.

Psalm 31:9-16.

Psalm 50 is a lament from the perspective of one who is suffering.

Philippians 2:5-11

Both of the New Testament lessons are concerned with the passion and death of Jesus. The second lesson indicates the selfless, sacrificial obedience that brought Christ to his death on the cross.

Matthew 26:14-27:66

The gospel lesson focuses on Jesus’ final hours.

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Easter Sunday
Date: 04 April 1999
Title: “The Day of Proclamation”

This past week, I received an Easter letter and offering envelope from a church I once served. At the top of the letter was the title, "God's Great Metaphor." The letter was very attractive and well written: "Who has not been delighted with crocuses peeking green and fresh through a blanket of late snow? Who has not mused at pussy willow blossoms popping boldly along spindly whips, wearing shades of gray, which compliment the hues of early
Spring? Who has not studied closely a stark branch of a maple tree to find the source of the hint of green, which can be sensed in its barren spaces--a pinpoint here--a dot there? Who has not smiled at the first robin flitting indignantly among patches of dirty snow? These are the first stirrings of spring--God's metaphors for the resurrection of Christ. What has died, lives again! He who was gone, has returned."

That is a fitting metaphor here in Iowa, but where is the exclamation, Hallelujah!? And where is the proclamation, CHRIST IS RISEN! CHRIST LIVES!?

In the secular world around us, especially that of the commercial world, we also have fertility images of eggs and rabbits. Spring symbolism has become the content of the Easter message, and resurrection is reduced to a biological necessity--a regeneration of the earth.

These metaphors are fine. I am not about to knock them, but there is more.

We celebrate Eternal Life this morning. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, not the pagan, Platonic doctrine of immortality, or the Rites of Spring. And there is a great difference between these doctrines.

Today we celebrate what God has done through the work of salvation, not just what God has done in creation. Salvation is the cause for our exclamation, Hallelujah! And salvation is the cause of our proclamation, CHRIST IS RISEN!

I thought this fact was clear to me, but years ago it was suddenly clarified and put into very sharp focus. A colleague of mine embarked on a pulpit exchange with a Congregational minister from New Zealand. I envied my colleague greatly, for he was doing something I would love to do. The exchange took place in the Spring. Off went my colleague with his family to New Zealand for six months, and the New Zealand parsonage family arrived simultaneously here in Iowa for a six-month stay. Before Easter, at a meeting of our ministerial association, we were discussing the celebration of Easter in the United States, among different traditions, and everyone present was using the same kinds of metaphors, for all of us were enjoying the first stirrings of Spring, and trying to come up with yet one more attention-getting metaphor to use in an Easter sermon. Our new friend from New Zealand looked at us with wide-open eyes. "Gentlemen," he interrupted, "has it ever occurred to you that on half of this planet, clearly, in half of the world, Easter occurs in the Autumn?"

Obviously, our "down under" colleague in ministry, even though he, also, enjoyed the first stirrings of Spring as much as anyone else, had a different set of metaphors for Easter, but his exclamation was the same: Hallelujah! And his proclamation was the same: CHRIST IS RISEN!

If we are going to be historically accurate, and geographically accurate, we might also note that ancient Palestine, and modern Israel, have, basically, two seasons: summer and winter--a hot, dry season, and a cooler season with some rain. Their growing season is during the cooler, more moist, season, because nothing grows during the hot, dry season. Therefore, their harvest season is in what we would call Spring. So, none of the metaphors we can
derive from the scriptures, would have anything to do with what we call Spring, that is, with blooming things, or, for that matter, with anything that is about to sprout or grow.

Our gospel lesson this morning points out a similar misunderstanding. Mary, however, is moved in her encounter with the risen Christ from misunderstanding to belief, and she runs to share the good news with the disciples. In all the events of the gospel lesson we see that it is the presence and activity of the Lord that bring the full transformation of life, which moves us into the true dynamics of Christian life and community.

It is not merely from what we see and believe, even in the first stirrings of Spring, that we live as Christians. We form our existence through the real presence of Christ in our lives. All that we have, which brings understanding to faith, is what Christ gives us. THE LORD IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN, INDEED! ALLELUIA!

Now, every morning, every season, will be filled with blessing and salvation! Alleluia! Amen!

Let us pray.

Great God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our Father, we rejoice in the resurrection of Christ and in your promise of eternal life. May the message of Easter give us the strength to break away from the power of sin and evil in our lives. May this good news free us to worship, and to serve and praise you even more. Release your blessings to us now as we enjoy this meal [Holy Communion] together. May your new life be felt in us and around us. May your love be shared by all. May your glory brighten our days. And may your grace forever fill our hearts. Amen.

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Easter 2
Thomas Sunday
Date: 11 April 1999
Title: “Tireless, Indispensable Doubt”
Text: John 20:19-31

There are a number of things in life that we are forced to do alone. No one else can really see for us. No one else can really hear for us. No one else can really touch or feel for us. Just think of the term, “personal touch:” no one can adequately describe for another the feel of a personal touch. No one else can really stand in our place at a meeting, or speak adequately for us. These are things we must do alone. And so it is with the private places in our lives wherein we encounter the risen Christ.

In this morning’s gospel lesson we find this true of the disciple Thomas. Thomas had not been in the presence of the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them, and, therefore, he did not believe, even though the other disciples told him about the appearance. Why didn't
Thomas believe the other disciples? Because Thomas, like so many of us, had to come to belief on his own.

There is great honesty in honest doubt, because life is full of things that may be so, but unless we personally experience them, we cannot be certain about them.

In his last book, written in the 1960's, the famous theologian, Leslie D. Weatherhead, wrote that many so-called Christians are sure of certain Christian truths; they are attracted by Christ, and they seek to show his spirit, but they cannot honestly and conscientiously "sign on the dotted line." They can honestly say, "It may be so," but they must also add, "I do not know."

I have witnessed a number of things personally during my life, but I have also ALMOST witnessed a number of things, and have had to say something like, "It may be so. I do not know."

Years ago, I was on a business trip to southern Illinois to the Wicks Pipe Organ Co. factory. Just south of Iowa City, where Route 218 compresses into a two lane road, from a divided highway, a woman driving a small red automobile pulled out into what she evidently thought was the passing lane, not realizing that she was now in two-way traffic. She swiped an oncoming pickup truck, then scraped along the side of an eighteen-wheeler to smack head-on into the trailer's back tires. I could see, way ahead of me, up the next hill, the commotion, but even though I was the next car behind that red car in the southbound lane, I was too far away to clearly witness what happened. I will not offer to you today a full account of that tragedy, but one thing I did immediately when I arrived on the scene was to get my fire extinguisher out of my trunk and stand by, because gasoline was dripping on the ground. Others more knowledgeable of emergency first aid did what they could until the ambulances arrived. When the rescue workers arrived, the police started asking witnesses about the accident. I knew quite a bit about what had happened, but, you see, I did not actually experience it as an eyewitness. My answers to most of the policeman's questions were, "I don't know." I was too far away from the actual event to honestly say anything more. My intellectual integrity could have allowed me to say a number of things, but I was not an eyewitness, and, therefore, my only honest answer was, "I don't know."

I am certain that every thoughtful person would have to admit that there are times when we are baffled by life as life presents itself. Our doubts, in such instances, are honest doubts. Likewise, we can also be baffled by Christian beliefs and truths as they are presented.

In Weatherhead's famous book, he offers sound advice to the baffled. He says, follow Jesus of Nazareth and learn from him, just as his disciples did. Accept Jesus Christ as your guide to God. When you doubt, start here, by just following, and then let your unfolding experiences lead to wider circles of understandings.

We are to remember Jesus’ simple call to discipleship: "Follow me." "You don't need to believe everything I believe just yet,” says Jesus, “just follow me and I will show you the
way to God." Jesus seemed to be confident that the sincere disciples would, in time, develop all the beliefs that were really needed.

With Weatherhead's fine writing in mind, we might understand why the story about the doubting disciple, named Thomas, is inserted in the gospels. Yes, it indeed leads us to the assertion, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," but it is probably also there because so many pilgrims in the Christian faith, at certain times, identify with Thomas.

The famous English writer, G. K. Chesterton, once remarked that only materialists and madmen "never have doubts." He went on to claim that the real mark of a believer might be the ability to doubt honestly. Real doubt, coming from a reverence for truth, is from God, claimed Chesterton. Real doubt does not forbid questions, nor does it answer questions prematurely. Instead, it reaches beyond understanding and asks honest questions. The work of doubting is essential to faith. If we do not deal seriously with life's most serious questions, how can we deal with the answers?

Years ago, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross became very famous and rather prosperous leading seminars on death and dying. In one of her books, she wrote, "Before I started working with dying patients, I did not believe in life after death. I now believe in life after death, beyond a shadow of doubt." That is not a statement of faith; that is a statement of fact. I'm not very impressed with her concept of immortality. Why? Because she confuses belief with knowledge. But many people have the same problem. I believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, but I don't know that he did. I wasn't there. If faith is a matter of knowing rather than believing, then we would not have churches, that is, we would not have worship centers, we would have only research centers.

Then, when do faith and fact, belief and knowledge come together? Well, they have come together in my life, and I have seen them come together in the lives of people I have known and loved.

When I think of people who used doubt's tireless cross-examination to great advantage, I think of my maternal grandmother. When she made a statement of faith, it was also usually a statement of fact. During my last visit with her in the nursing home, she said to me, "Tommy, if I did not KNOW that I have a loving Savior, I would be very discouraged." My grandmother had faced many trials during her life, but through it all she kept following and she kept learning, and she found all the beliefs she really needed.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

ACTS 2:14A, 22-32

In the weeks after Easter, readings from the book of Acts traditionally replace the usual Old Testament lessons. Today's first lesson is part of a speech by Peter, who claims that God acted through Jesus and that God's divine plan is fulfilled in and through Jesus.
PSALM 16

Psalm 16 is a psalm of trust, which Peter quotes in his sermon found in the second chapter of Acts.

I. PETER 1:3-9

The second lesson probes the important role of faith in the larger context of Christ's work of salvation, where faith is both God's gift to us and our response to God.

JOHN 20:19-31

The gospel lesson is a story that outlines the changing nature of faith when future disciples will no longer be able to see the risen Lord.

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Easter 3  
(Pulpit Exchange Sunday)  
Date: 18 April 1999  
Title: “United and Uniting”

(Evidently, the Church and Society Committee has been working on a Pulpit and People exchange for some time. Today, the exchange is a reality: the talk has become the walk, as it were. The purpose of the exchange is to foster connectedness among the churches in our association. The sermon topic suggested by the Committee for today is unity or mission. The Church and Society Committee is planning to focus on mission at the Association meeting on April 25th.)

As I was reading the gospel lesson for this Sunday, I thought it was interesting to compare conversations I have heard about unity and our common mission as Christians to the conversation along the road to Emmaus, where we find two, know-it-all fools babbling on and on about past events, not even realizing the presence of Christ.

In the United Church of Christ we talk a great deal about being united and uniting. "United and Uniting" has been a basic slogan with our denomination since the formation of the United Church of Christ. Where has that "talk" taken us? As we have "talked the talk," have we really "walked the walk?" Yes, in many ways we have. Years ago a dialogue began between the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ, which emphasizes the "united and uniting" efforts of both denominations and the common goals of both denominations with their common underlying theology. But, surely, the most exciting event of recent years was the vote in 1997 to be in full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church, and the Reformed Church in America. That great occasion is perhaps just a memory today, so I might take a moment to refresh our memories. According to the plan, the four denominations agreed to: 1. Recognize each other
as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered,  
2. Withdraw any and all condemnations of each other, 3. Continue to recognize each other's  
baptism and authorize and encourage sharing of Communion, 4. Recognize each other's  
various ministries and make provisions for the orderly exchange of ordained ministers and,  
5. Pledge themselves to continuing dialogue under the principle of mutual affirmation and  
mutual admonition.

This event was more than a bit of babble on the road to Emmaus. This historical event  
signaled a moment of renewal and celebration, not only within all four major Reformed  
Denominations, but for all Christians.

There have been very few times since the Protestant Reformation that Protestants, who are  
defined more by their protest than by their attest--more by their differences than by their  
similarities--have actually made great strides toward realizing their oneness in Christ Jesus,  
and the companionship of Christ in their journey and in their mission.

It is not possible to understand Protestantism apart from the Protestant Reformation of the  
sixteenth century and the principles of all the principal reformers. And yet, Protestantism is  
more than the Reformation. All Christians are part of an historical community of faith, with  
one Lord, and one common destination, and this is what should be uniting us in mission.

Our common history with all Christians began thousands of years ago with Abraham. It was  
reformed by Moses, by David, and by Josiah. It was radically reformed by Jesus of  
Nazareth, and by the Apostle Paul; by Augustine and Aquinas; by the great monks, Benedict  
and Francis; and by the great reformers, namely, John Wycliffe in England, Martin Luther in  
Germany, John Calvin in France, Ulrich Zwingly in Switzerland, and John Knox in  
Scotland. Later, John Wesley, an Anglican priest, reformed his tradition and founded the  
Methodist movement. In this century, by far one of the greatest reformers has been Angelo  
Roncalli, known to Roman Catholics as Pope John XXIII, who had a tremendous impact on  
Christians of every denomination with his consuming desire for the ultimate union of all  
creeds. Recently, Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical, titled, "That All May Be One,"  
and invited the leaders and theologians of all denominations "to engage with me in a patient  
and fraternal dialogue" concerning the barriers faced by modern ecumenical efforts. All this  
indicates that reformation is more a process than a condition, but the process must be  
essential to the mission of the Church Universal. If the mission of the Church is not  
understood as a mission for unity, then ecumenism will never take place--it will never have  
a chance.

I've attended a number of seminars and ecumenical dialogues over the years, and all I have  
witnessed, so far, is one opportunity after another for denominational leaders and  
theologians to restate their existing positions, and the result is just more babbling on the road  
to Emmaus. They all say they are in mission for the sake of unity, but they go for comfort  
rather than truth; they know what they like and they like what they know, and that is all they  
can talk about. Thus, there aren't too many reformers among them.
But, as Emerson once wrote, we all are reformers: "We are reformers in spring and summer; in autumn and winter we stand by the old. Reformers in the morning, conservatives at night. Conservatism goes for comfort, reform for truth."

As I was thinking of Emerson's words this past week, I could not help but reflect on what we are doing here and throughout our Association today: It is spring, and it is morning, and twenty or so ministers and congregations are reaching out to each other to foster connectedness among our churches, and we are making our way down the road and we know who is walking with us. Perhaps if we can do this here, in northeast Iowa, this process can continue to grow throughout our denomination and throughout the Church Universal until all may be one. Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

ACTS 2:14A, 36-41

The first lesson presents an abbreviated form of the exchange between the Pentecost crowd and the apostles, especially Peter. The crowd is skeptical, scrutinizing, even ready to have a good laugh at the expense of someone whom they thought might be drunk. When Peter speaks, however, the attitude of the crowd changes. He calls for them to repent, to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, to experience the forgiveness of their sins, and to receive the Holy Spirit.

LUKE 24:13-35

The gospel lesson explores the tension that is inevitable to post-Easter Christians. This story conveys the tension through the blindness of the two disciples to the presence of the risen Lord who is walking with them on the road to Emmaus.

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Easter 4  
Date: 25 April 1999  
Title: “Living As An Offering”  
Text: 1 Peter 2:19-25

Weeks ago when I chose the New Testament lesson for this morning as the text for my sermon, I certainly had no idea that, as I would be putting together this sermon, I would be agonizing, with people throughout our nation, over the news of the tragedy in a Denver high school.

Although the biblical commentators mention nothing about it, throughout the week, a certain biblical truth seemed to leap from the pages of my Bible concerning Peter's words about grace in suffering, enduring suffering, wrongful suffering, patient endurance, trusting God while suffering, and about Jesus as an example of grace in suffering.
Truthfully, I have never liked this text. I chose to preach on it more as a challenge than an opportunity. All the business about slavery offends my modern sensibility, and this writer shows absolutely no political sensitivity concerning even the actions of oppressive slave masters.

The classic Interpreter's Bible does an interesting thing with this text. It discusses the slavery issue in its exegesis, that being the careful study of the text, but in its exposition it presents the topic of all Christians as servants and the importance of their vocations. The underlying fact is that Christians in every age live in a social situation that is saturated with maladjustment and imperfect relationships. Today, at the end of the twentieth century, we may have a little of the older slavery left, but there is much in our age that smacks of a new slavery. Yes, employment figures show that the rate of employment is very high, but the facts show that most of the new jobs, especially here in Iowa, are entry level, part-time jobs at minimum wage, with no benefits. They are not jobs that can support a family.

In Nashua, where I live, I know of a number of single parent families where the one and only parent has two or more part-time jobs, is never home, and depends on a teenager to care for the rest of the children. I know of a number of families where both the mother and the father have more than one part-time job—one of them works at night, the other during the day. If one of them becomes ill, that portion of the family income stops until the person gets back to work. They have no health insurance. They are essentially slaves to the social situation. They perform their daily tasks as best they can; they possess personal integrity, but they get nowhere.

Civilization has abolished some of the humiliations and some of the indignities involved in life, but civilization alone cannot provide people with the positive attitude and the sense of dignity that is needed to get somewhere in this life.

Therefore, this talk in today's lesson about slavery makes sense after all. Doesn't it!

We, all of us, have been slaves to something or somebody. All of us have, at some time or other, been victims of maladjusted and imperfect relationships. All of us have suffered unjustly from time to time.

Hopefully, we did not just suffer for the sake of suffering. We are here this morning, probably, because we have refused to idealize suffering. We are Christians! Christ freed us from that form of slavery. Even the evil to which the youth in a Denver high school became victim—even that—cannot be allowed to determine the nature of reality for us. The evil, to which the people in Kosovo have become victim, cannot be allowed to determine the nature of reality for us. Illness, death, unemployment, destructive relationships, war, poverty, natural disasters, cannot be allowed to determine the nature of reality for us. If they are allowed to do that, then we become enslaved.
I am certain that we can sense that this is true, but modern society thinks of most suffering as something to be remedied. If we should suffer from a headache, we should take aspirin, or, Bufferin, or, Tylenol, or Excedrin, or Advil.

Today's lesson points out that suffering is not something to be remedied. Suffering is something to be offered--offered to God our Father, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who suffered for us, who bore our sins, and by doing that, freed us to view even our personal sufferings from the point of view of grace. As the words of the song we are about to sing put it, “All that we have and all that we offer comes from a heart both frightened and free.”

Yes, all of it! The joys, the blessings, the laughter, the leisure, YES, and the sorrows, the sufferings, the tears, and the endless work!

ALL OF IT IS AN OFFERING. All of it is something to offer, the worst along with the best, because that is life. That is what we have. That is what we can offer. And God does not expect anything more, or anything less.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

ACTS 2:42-47

In the first lesson from Acts, we are told of the early Christians’ generosity toward one another and of the steady work of God in the life and growth of the Church.

PSALM 23

This morning we will sing the 23rd Psalm, which, among other things, celebrates God's securing care and bountiful provision for humanity.

1 PETER 2:19-25

The second lesson, which is my sermon text this morning, describes the redemptive suffering of Jesus through an address to slaves.

JOHN 10:1-10

The gospel lesson explores the protective role of Jesus as a gate that limits access to the sheep. This is done in the form of an address to religious leaders.

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Easter 5
Date: 02 May 1999
Title: “The Witness of Stephen”
Text: Acts 7:54-60
One Sunday morning in Milwaukee, when I was assisting the senior minister in worship, as both of us were greeting the exiting congregation following the second worship service, a boy about seven or eight years old paused in front of the large bronze plaque from the Second World War that was mounted on the narthex wall next to a smaller plaque that honored the dead from the First World War. The boy, whose parents were talking with the senior minister, went over to the minister and asked, "Dr. Ream, what is that," pointing to the plaque? "Oh," said Dr. Ream, obviously annoyed by the interruption, "that's in memory of those who died in the service." The boy looked puzzled, and, before the adults could resume their conversation, asked another question: "Was that at the 8:30 or at the 10:00 o'clock service?"

The first lesson this morning, is about the first person to die in the service of the Church. Stephanos was his name: Stephen. Stephen was one of the seven appointed by the original Apostles for a new Order in the Church. Most New Testament scholars view this appointment, with the laying on of hands, as the first ordination of deacons in the new church.

What was the history of these seven? We have no idea except for what we know about Stephen and Philip.

Chapters six and seven in the book of Acts are interesting because of there silence about the seven. Who were they and what did they do? Stephen remains on the scene very briefly. He runs a very rapid course, flinging even the Apostles into the shadows for a time, and then he disappears. The passage says that he did great signs and wonders, but none are described. Before we even get to know him, he is dead.

So many early Christians fall into the same category; they labored for the faith in obscurity, with God's judgment their only reward.

What else do we know about Stephen? With his name, Stephanos, we know that he was a Hellenistic Jew, that is, a Greek Jew. Who were they? Many belonged to the Libertines who were very interesting people. As the Roman conquerors spread their influence over the entire civilized world, including the Middle East, the Jews were enslaved and dispersed throughout the empire. Many of the slaves were talented and skilled people, and soon mixed with the primarily Greek culture of the time. Later on, as the empire expanded even further, and a long period of prosperity was maintained under the enforced peace due to Roman rule, many of the Grecian Jews were freed, and they returned to Jerusalem. Thus, they were called Libertines. Many of them, it seems, became Christians, and this led to conflicts with the Sadducees, who were the leaders of the native Jewish population.

In this story we also meet one of the most notorious persecutors of the Libertines, Saul of Tarsus. Saul, like the rest of the Sadducees, found Stephen's words derogatory to the city and to the temple. Soon a mob formed, and Stephen was dragged before the Sanhedrin within the temple precincts. Stephen did the best he could to defend himself. He started off
rather slowly and gently, but then, as the story goes, "he was full of the Spirit." He lashed out at the Sanhedrin with rather harsh language. He called his hearers stiff-necked people. He looked into the eyes of circumcised Jewish men and said "so what if one part of you is circumcised; your hearts aren't and your eyes aren't." He called them betrayers and murderers of Jesus, and he told them that their temple and their city and everything else they believed in were all headed straight to hell.

Needless to say, the Jews did not like what they heard. Saul, for one, was infuriated, and was very likely the agent in Stephen's arrest. But Stephen was not executed. The Sanhedrin had no authority to execute anyone. Stephen was the victim of a mob. He was lynched. And Saul watched silently. Where was Roman law and order such as the order Pontius Pilate tried to maintain during the trial of Jesus? It was gone! The year was 37 CE; the emperor had died and Pilate was recalled to Rome. Pilate's subordinate officer in charge of Jerusalem was concerned only with the protection of Roman citizens, and he ignored the riots and other uprisings of non-Roman citizens, which swelled to a dangerous level very quickly. Saul took great advantage of the chaos of the time, and intensified his persecution of the Christians to the extent that in a very short period of time, most of them fled the city (much as the ethnic Albanians have fled Kosovo in fear for their lives), taking nothing, winding up homeless in seaside towns where they could get on the first ship to Rome and to the safety of Roman law and order. This is how the Christian Church got such a strong start in Rome.

But something else was happening. Something was happening inside Saul. Saul had been shocked at Stephen's speech. He was also shocked by the prayers Stephen prayed as he died, and by the faith Stephen displayed. As the biblical scholar, Barclay, once wrote, quoting a famous sentence from Augustine's great, historical sermon about Stephen, "The Church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen." The death of Stephen was the turning point for Saul: Saul, who was at first the silent observer, then the consenting witness, then the persecutor, but finally the believer who was re-named Paul, and who, like Stephen, would imitate the spirit and the language of Jesus.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

ACTS 7:54-60

The first lesson, which is the sermon text for the morning, tells of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

PSALM 31

Psalm 31 is a prayer Psalm for deliverance from one's enemies in which the psalmist utters a line similar to Stephen's prayer.

I. PETER 2:2-10

The second lesson explores the character of the risen Lord in the post-Resurrection age with the feminine image of mother's milk and the architectural metaphor of a living stone.
The gospel lesson describes the relationship of the Son and the Father in the Trinity, and the implications of this relationship on the life of Jesus’ disciples.

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Easter 6
Festival of the Christian Home
Date: 09 May 1999
Title: “The Christian Home”

What do we think of when we think of a Christian home? Many would start answering this question by talking about the parents in that home, and, for the sake of brevity, that will be my focus this morning. But first, I would like to call our attention to the question that Peter tried to answer in the New Testament lesson for today: Does it make any difference to the world in which I live that I am a Christian? As a parent, as a grandparent, trying to help the next generation, does it make any difference to the world in which I live, that I am a Christian?

What makes a good parent? Is it possible to teach someone how to be a good parent? How would the grandparents here this morning answer that question? Some things can be passed on from parent to child, and some can be learned from raw experience, and some from books, but what does it really take to be a good parent?

Many experts say that too much is expected of parents today. Is that true? So much has changed within the period of one generation. When I was young, my family was the first in our neighborhood to own a television set. Often, all the kids in the neighborhood would gather at our house to watch TV. My parents didn't need to worry about what we were watching on TV in the afternoon in those days. But that is no longer true. In this so-called information age in which we live, is too much expected of parents?

All of us who are parents--and I want to be very inclusive here, as in once a parent, always a parent--All of us who are parents can probably reflect back to a time when WE expected a great deal from OUR parents. We also expect a great deal from ourselves as a well as a great deal from our children. Each of us wants to experience a parent's pride, but how do we do that in a way that is constructive and meaningful?

Years ago I read a story from a biography of President Dwight Eisenhower. During President Eisenhower's term in office, his mother was interviewed on a television talk show. When the talk show host asked her, "Aren't you proud of your son?,” Mrs. Eisenhower surprised the host by replying, "Yes, I am, but which one are you referring to?"--a delightful reply from a loving parent who had more than one son.
Is too much expected of parents today?

Today, it is very common to find both parents frantically developing their careers while hiring others to raise their children. But, as I pointed out in a recent sermon, in most contemporary families, both parents NEED to work to help with the family budget. In far too many families both parents are part-time employees in more than one part-time job just to make ends meet. And our society is seeing an increase in single parent families with a simultaneous decrease in aid to the children involved. But parents are still expected to provide everything their children need. So what makes a good parent?

All parents need a good support system. Often, this involves grandparents, or, in the absence of an extended family, the help of good neighbors and friends. Baby sitters and childcare providers are one thing, but they do not eliminate the need for a support system. As the saying goes, "it takes a village" to raise a child. Parents aren't enough. The family is larger than those who live in one house, and a home is more than a house. A home is part of a family, part of neighborhood, and part of a community. As Christians, we know also that a family needs to be part of a Christian family and a community of faith.

At the turn of the century, when this building was built, making ends meet took lots of time and energy. It still does. But, today we are told that, no matter what our calling in life may be, we must feel good all of the time: satisfied, pleased, happy. Is such an expectation realistic? Obviously, it is not!

And yet, no one in this world has a greater opportunity to bring such satisfaction and pleasantness and happiness into this world than parents. No one has a greater opportunity to bring love into a world that is often unloving, and no one has a greater opportunity to bring forgiveness into a world that is usually unforgiving, than parents, but parents can't do that alone. It takes a whole village to do that.

As the saying goes, the future just isn't what it used to be, but, in spite of the turns society has taken in recent decades, the family is an enduring institution, and it is to be cherished. Today, the word 'family' may define a variety of family units. All of them, including single-parent families, need to function as families, but they cannot do it alone.

I am confident that our society can still shape an environment that strengthens and supports families, but I am also certain that the odds against that happening will continue to grow if we, all of us, do not outdo one another in acts of kindness, generosity, thoughtfulness, and forgiveness.

Does it make a difference to the world in which I live that I am a Christian? You bet it does, and now, probably, more than ever before.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

ACTS 17:22031
The first lesson is part of a sermon-speech by Paul, who says that necessary changes are needed because of the work of God in Jesus Christ.

PSALM 66:8-20

Psalm 66 is a profound expression of piety, filled with vivid imagery, and recalling the goodness of God both to Israel and to the psalmist.

I. PETER 3:13-22

Both New Testament readings address ways in which Jesus is present with post-Easter Christians. This reading explores how baptism allows Christians to live in the Spirit of Jesus even in times of suffering.

JOHN 14:15-21

The gospel lesson describes how the Holy Spirit dwells in disciples as an extension of Jesus.

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Easter 7
Date: 16 May 1999
Title: “Power to Serve”
Text: Acts 1:6-14

The first lesson this morning, from the book of Acts, begins with a wrong question, which Jesus does not bother to answer; he, instead, corrects the question.

What do you do when people ask you stupid questions? If you try to answer a stupid question, you might appear to be less competent than the person who asked it. If you ask the person to repeat the question, you risk the embarrassment of admitting to the person that you really were not paying much attention to what he or she was saying, or that you are, perhaps, hard of hearing. Or you could try what my great-aunt used to say: "What did you say? I can't hear you." She died at the age of nine hundred and something, and never once admitted that she was deaf.

"Lord, will you restore the Kingdom to Israel?"

Wrong question! Bad question! Jesus never speculated about the future; he dealt only with the present.

Why do people dwell so much on the future, and project so much of what they long for into the future? "If I just get the break I need, or the job I deserve, then everything will be fine." Of course, America's gambling craze has not helped any of us as we try to deal with the
present. Ah, yes, the Power Ball—that will help me project into the future all the things I long for. It could happen! “You can't win if you don't play!”

It is always a temptation to some people to dream about the future, and to project into the future all the things they long for, yet lack, in the present.

"Lord, are you going to restore the Kingdom today?"

"Wrong question!"

People do speculate about the future, do they not? Jesus did not speculate! Instead, he demonstrated what people should be doing. Restore the Kingdom? What are you talking about? Why don't you try showing people what the world can be like when people really respect each other as children of God? Before you buy another lottery ticket, give that a try! After you've given that a try, then go buy a Power Ball ticket if you want to, but get the priorities straight.

Evidently, even though Jesus told his disciples that he would not leave them comfortless, they interpreted what he said to mean that everything would be the same after he died. He said he would be with them always. They believed what he said was true. And yes, we know that truth comes back, like a boomerang. But truth does not come back the same way it goes away. That, I suppose, is why we should always tell the truth. As Mark Twain once said, “Always tell the truth; it will surprise some people, and astonish the rest.”

Things seldom come back the way they go. And people never come back the way they go.

When I left home to go to college, I returned as a different person. When I graduated from college and left friends and family to begin a new career, when I occasionally did return home for a visit, I returned as a different person. When I was discharged after four years in the military and re-entered civilian life, I was not the same person. People seldom come back the same way they went.

The people whom we love always come back to us, but seldom do they come in exactly the same way that they left us. We meet old friends at reunions, and, oh my, how they have changed. If they ever were our friends at all, then they are now really “old friends.”

Neither things nor people come back the same way they went.

The story of the ascension of Jesus confirms this fact, but it also reminds us that Jesus did not leave in order to be absent. Christ does not absent himself from the faithful. Christ is present, not absent. He is not the same as he was as a living, breathing human being, but the spirit of Christ is present through the work of his disciples. Wherever the faithful gather, even just two or three of them, wherever the gospel is proclaimed, wherever the work of the kingdom is done, the spirit of Christ lives.
I believe it is very interesting to note that Jesus corrected the disciples' question without answering it. He obviously did not want to leave them pondering the significance of what had happened to him. No one needs to ponder something that is important to the point of becoming inactive. Christianity is not a guessing game. Christianity is not a game of chance. God's purposes are plainly enough revealed that we should understand them clearly.

"Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom?" Wrong question!

Lord, am I going to win the lottery? Wrong question!

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Acts 1:6-14

In the first chapter of Acts, the Ascension of Jesus means that the Jesus of the past is the risen Lord of the present, and through the Ascension, Christ moves into a position to return as Lord of the future.

Psalm 68

Psalm 68 celebrates the kingship of God, and recalls God's saving grace, and looks forward to what God will achieve in the future.

I. Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

The New Testament readings this morning provide a fitting conclusion to the Easter season. Both describe what it means for disciples to be in relationship with the risen Lord, and how our relationship with God must redefine our lives in this world.

John 17:1-11

The gospel lesson explores what it means for disciples to embody the glory of the risen Lord.

Trinity Sunday
Date: 30 May 1999
Title: “A Trinity of Love”

Today is Trinity Sunday.

About a year ago, some of the most knowledgeable theologians in the world gathered for what was called a “Trinity Summit.” Twenty international scholars, both philosophers and theologians, gathered to discuss fourteen papers dealing with the following topics: St. Paul's
Trinitarian faith, Jesus’ self-description as “Son of Man” with its connotation of divinity, monarchianism, tritheism, apophaticism, cataphaticism, the immanent Trinity, the economic Trinity, substance, hypostasis, the Trinity in art, and preaching on the Trinity.

As a theologian, with a doctorate in the field, I would certainly like to read through all those papers, if in fact I live long enough to do so. I like that stuff. But, there is also another part of me that is probably asking the same question you are asking: “So what?”

Here’s another SO WHAT!

As I was reading over the lessons for this Sunday, and read through the Genesis passage, I recalled the heated Creationist/Evolutionist debates of the past decades. Actually, I always assumed that both sides were talking about the same thing, but in different ways.

There are at least three major evolutionary theories: Materialistic Evolution--totally a chance process; Deistic Evolution, which sort of means that God just started it and then let it all go; Theistic Evolution, which is one theory we hear very little about; it is based on the theory that God is an intrinsic part of the evolutionary process as a guiding force, or as THE guiding force.

Generally speaking, Evolutionists of different persuasions usually get along quite well together, because their basic premise is the same.

Upon the other hand, the Creationists never seem to be satisfied with each other. They have Old Earth theories and New Earth theories. Among the New Earth theories are Progressive Creationism, and Concordism, which is very close to Theistic Evolution. There is Mosaic Vision theory, Multiple Gap theory, Multiple Catastrophism, Multiple Creationism, and Gap Theory, and many, many more. Among the Old Earth Creationists we have the followers of Flat Creationism. (As an aside, here, I will confess to you that for decades I secretly wanted to join the Flat Earth Society--I just wanted to find out if such a group really existed--but I have never been invited to join.) There is also a group called the Apparent Age Creationists.

While serving in the U. S. Navy, I met a person who believed in Apparent Age Creationism. He believed that the earth was only 4000-something years old. I asked him how he could explain the existence of fossils and dinosaur bones. He told me that God had just created them--God simply and impulsively created the fossils and the bones along with everything else. In other words, there were never any creatures whose remains were fossilized, neither were there any dinosaurs, just a God who delighted in deceiving human beings, and playing very sick jokes on the people whom he created in his own image.

Truthfully, I believe that understanding something like the creation of the universe, or like the Trinity, often means that we should probably stop when we are ahead. As Dr. Edwin Olson, a professor of geology and physics once wrote in the Christian Herald, "If God chose to bring the world to its present state in a slow and gradual way, he is not less God, I am no less who I am, and the world is no less in need of a Savior."
No matter how we perceive God, no matter how we think the world was created, the world is no less in need of a Savior!

So, this morning we are asked to reflect upon the Trinity--the Trinitarian tapestry of simple yet profound terms describing to us the relationships of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This is a relationship that counts, but how is it defined? Well, these are some of the words that the Bible uses to define and describe the Holy Trinity's connection to us:

Love, truth, holiness, life, mercy, graciousness, kindness, fidelity, blessedness, praiseworthy, exaltation, glory, grace, fellowship, salvation; and there are more. These are the things that save us, and that give us new life. We do not need to explain them as much as we need simply to enjoy them.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

The first lesson from Genesis focuses on the creative power of God, with a sweeping account of the creation of order from chaos.

Psalm 8

Psalm 8 is a hymn that celebrates the creative power of God.

Both of the New Testament lessons contain Trinitarian language in polished statements. All of the lessons this morning do a good job of summing up divine activity and of reminding us of the whole work and being of God in creation.

* Proper 5

Date: 06 June 1999
Title: “Being a Blessing”
Text: Genesis 12:1-9

"You will be a blessing," said God to Abram.

What is a blessing and how does a person become a blessing?

I'd like to tell you a story about a young man, a yuppie type dude.... He was well educated, landed a good a job and made a great deal of money, and soon saved enough to buy a brand
new Ferrari. Because of his religious background, the fortunate young man thought that he should get his new car blessed, so he went to the Catholic priest in town and asked the priest for a blessing. "Oh, its not for me, explained the yuppie, its for my new car. You see I just bought a new Ferrari and I would like you to give it your blessing." The priest replied, "What's a Ferrari?"

The young man was so upset with the priest's question that he excused himself and left.

Next he went to visit the Episcopal clergyman in town. "Father," he asked the Episcopal priest, "do you bless things as well as people in your church." "Well, yes, but it depends on what it is."

So the young man explained to the Episcopal clergyman how he managed to save enough money to buy a Ferrari, and asked if the priest would give it his blessing. "What's a Ferrari," asked the Episcopalian?

By now the yuppie dude was very depressed. He had spent so much money on his new car, and he had been so happy with it and with himself, that to find out no clergy even knew what a Ferrari was, was heartbreaking.

But there was one more church in town, so he thought he would give it a try. Into the Congregational Church he walked rather timidly. The Congregational minister was seated behind his desk. The young man knocked at the office door, and introduced himself. "Reverend," he said shyly, "do you have a moment?" "Why of course young man, please come in." "Reverend, I just bought a new Ferrari..." "You did," said the clergyman, jumping up from his chair, "you say you just bought a Ferrari--can I see it?"

The young man smiled from ear to ear, "Sure, it's right out front."

"O man," exclaimed the Congregational minister, as he rushed out of the church to see the dazzling yellow, magnificent piece of automotive perfection. "Will you take me for a ride, please," pleaded the minister?

"Sure, hop in," said the young man, and they took a spin around the town, and, too soon, as far as the Congregational minister was concerned, they arrived back at the church door.

"Wow, what a car! I've never ridden in a Ferrari before. Thank you so much. That was great! Now what was it that you came to see me about?"

"Oh, yes," said the young man, "you see I just got this fantastic car and I'd like you to give it your blessing."

The Congregational minister looked very puzzled as he asked, "What's a blessing?"

We Congregationalists are not big at blessing things. We dedicate things to the ministry of the congregation, but when it comes to blessing, that is usually something we ask God to do.
Before a meal we might ask God to bless the food to our use and us to his service. Before we leave church on Sunday morning, the minister might ask for God's blessing to be with us and remain with us always. So, what exactly is a blessing?

God said to Abram, "You will be a blessing!" How can a person become a blessing?

What kinds of people can become a blessing to other people?

So many people just want to be left alone. They prefer to stay where they are and as they are, rather than try hard to arrive at something different.

Others are not so indifferent, but they have positive desires that can become consuming. They want to live well. They want to get to the Promised Land.

Many are not overly concerned with self-indulgence, but they still want to be pleased. They desire power, and prestige. All are subject to the world's necessities. Most people legitimately seek a livelihood and a reasonable provision for their material wants. That is not a sin. Remember, from this morning's story, that Abram left everything he had, but in his new setting God's favor for Abram allowed Abram's flocks and herds to increase in his new setting. Remember, that Jesus included in his prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." No social order, no religion, no economic system can claim justification unless it makes available to all people the physical basis of a decent living. Life has influence, and the right exercise of life must not be taken lightly. But no life wins blessedness by seeking possessions or power for their own sake. Neither does it win blessedness by wanting to be left alone.

So, what is a blessing and what is blessedness?

First of all, blessedness is something God does. Blessedness does not get rid of life's dangers, but it does give us the strength to bear them. More than that, blessedness is simply the knowledge that one may be a blessing to others. Jesus prayed that his disciples might be blessed through him. May we join him in his prayer, that we, too, may become a blessing to others.

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Proper 6
Date: 13 June 1999
Title: “Laugh With Me”
Text: Genesis 18:1-15

Is anything too difficult for God?
Sarah thought so. When she found out that she was to have a child in the spring, she laughed. She was way past childbearing age. So, she demonstrated her unbelief by laughing her head off.

As we read the rest of the story about Sarah in Genesis, we realize that laughing remains central to the rest of the story. God asks Abraham, "Why is your wife laughing?" He replies, "I don't know." God asks Abraham another question: "Is there anything that is too difficult for God?" Abraham answers, again, with "I don't know." (Duh?!) Then the child is born, and Abraham and Sarah name the child Isaac, which means, "laughing."

There is a great deal of humor in the Bible. Look for it and you will find it.

Humor helps us to put things into perspective. It enables us to notice that which is grandiloquent and pretentious and boastful, and to recognize it for what it really is. Humor can also help us to see ourselves more clearly, and safeguard us from becoming overly pompous.

In the final analysis, can there be anything more ridiculous than a pompous Christian?

Humor can also blunt an attack and relativize an issue. For instance, in the New Testament, in Mark 7:24-30, we learn about a Gentile woman who broke in on Jesus’ much needed privacy, to seek his help for her unfortunate child. Jesus confronted the woman with words that are very difficult for us to understand. He seems to be cruel and harsh and unfeeling, and totally inconsistent with the gospel. He says to her that he must feed the children of Israel first, and not throw bread to the dogs, that is, to the Gentiles. There can be no possible justification for such a remark from Jesus if it is taken literally. He had already healed the demoniac of Gadara in Gentile territory. The only possible explanation for Jesus’ reply is that Jesus was humoring the woman. He was obviously joking about the ethnic problems of his day.

We further realize that his remark was intended to be humorous as we read the woman's clearly humorous reply. She says that she might be a dog, but dogs at least get crumbs. She didn't ask for much. Jesus admired her persistence, her energy and her wit, and he healed her daughter. Her witty reply won what the plain request had failed to obtain. More than that, her humor had expressed her faith. She used humor to reject everything that was contrary to her hopes. Her humor was proof of her faith.

Isn't it refreshing to realize that our Lord could laugh; that he could appreciate a clever remark?

The world we live in is so big, and we are such a small part of it. If we really know what the stakes are, we will need to have a sense of humor. And we might also need to realize that God has a sense of humor.
One of my favorite religious writers is Elton Trueblood, who wrote a book titled, *The Humor of Christ*. He proclaimed that we adults, who read the Bible, often miss many of its truths, because we take everything too seriously.

How did Dr. Trueblood discover this truth? He was reading from the New Testament to his four year old son, from the seventh chapter of Matthew, about judging others, and, suddenly, his young son burst into laughter. The boy laughed and laughed and laughed, and Dr. Trueblood had no idea of what his son was laughing about, until he realized that he had from time to time removed irritating debris from his son's eyes with greater or lesser success, but he had never needed to remove a log. His son had never had a great big wooden beam stuck in his eye.

Think of a few more New Testament images. How about the picture of someone trying to get a camel through the eye of a needle? And, really, folks, my dear friends, what could possibly be funnier than the picture of a person trying to swallow a camel? That is absolutely hilarious. That is slapstick comedy.

So, for God's sake, keep your sense of humor.

We are redeemed people. We have been set free from our pretensions, from sham and triteness. Our humor gives our faith perspective. It may very well be our greatest gift to share with this uptight and fearful world in which we live.

So, keep you sense of humor, and keep the faith, and God bless you. Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES


The first lesson explores the question of whether anything is too difficult for God.

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

Psalm 116 is a song of thanksgiving, which celebrates the fact that indeed nothing is beyond God's reach.

Romans 5:1-8

The second lesson speaks of the length to which God's faithfulness will go: the God who gives a son to Sarah gives his own Son so that the world's weeping may be turned into laughter.

Matthew 9:35-10:8

The gospel lesson raises for us the interesting question of ministry and identity.
Proper 7
Father's Day Meditation
Date: 17 June 1999
Title: “The Fatherhood of God”
Text: Matthew 10:24-39

There is not a great deal in the Bible that deals with the character of God. Scripture deals mainly with God's relation to people and people's relation to God. God is the subject of people's thoughts, not the object. Particularly in the Old Testament, God is not talked about, but, rather, talked TO. God is the living God who has the power to save us when the other gods cannot.

In the New Testament, however, Jesus gives the name of God character. He referred to God as Father—as Your Father, and as Our Father. In the story of the Prodigal Son, which is better titled the story of the Waiting Father, we learn of the loving acceptance of a parent, which reflects the love of God.

If God is our Father, then what kind of sons and daughters are we? Well, first of all, we are people who need to perceive our true worth by accepting the goodness that God would like others to see in us. The Fatherhood of God helps us to do this. His acceptance of us gives us a place among the living, and assures us that we are not destined to live our days among the lost, but among the found.

Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Genesis 21:8-21

The first lesson this morning is the story of Hagar's salvation, a second story of salvation, which follows the story of the birth of Isaac.

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

Psalm 86 is a lament in which the psalmist asks for help from God in a threatening situation.

Romans 6:1b-11

The second lesson meditates upon the depths of the meaning of Christian life.

Matthew 10:24-39

The gospel lesson takes up the theme of disciples being witnesses for Christ.
There is a saying, “What goes around, comes around.” I have also heard the saying reversed: “What comes around, goes around,” but that has never made much sense to me.

The gospel lesson this morning is about what goes around.

What goes around? Well, basically, what goes around is what we send around. Jesus said that you and I can actually determine what goes around. What goes around is what WE send around!

Jesus asked his followers to answer his call to discipleship. Answering that call was rather easy; it meant simply living the life of one of his disciples. When a person did that, the person would immediately receive rewards. The person would immediately have a meaningful relationship with other disciples, and enjoy a sense of community. Also, because Christ came as a servant, as Christ's disciples, as we receive others in his name, we also receive Christ. When we realize this, we experience the joy of service, and we find even more of a reason to answer Christ's call, and we choose to live more fully a life of discipleship, and then WE receive the rewards, and then we receive others in Christ's name, and then we receive him, and then we experience even more the joy of service, and then we answer Christ's call more sincerely, etc., etc. WHAT A REMARKABLE CIRCULARITY!

WHAT GOES AROUND, COMES AROUND!

If we make it around and through this cycle, then we find the rewards. But, the results are rewards, not benefits, and Christians need to know the difference between rewards and benefits.

As a licensed insurance agent, I would be the first to point out to anyone that a life insurance policy is a benefit, not a reward. Life insurance is not an investment; it is a benefit. There is a certain difference between a benefit and an investment, and there is certainly a very big difference between a benefit and a reward. Why? Because, what goes around, comes around.

Today's gospel lesson reminds me of a children's story I have cherished for a number of years. It's about a young boy and his friend, Jeremy. (I’m sorry you can’t see the illustrations from where you are seated, because they are precious.)

Sunday we went fishing.
Jeremy caught a little fish.
I caught a shoe.

Jeremy caught a medium fish.
I caught a can.

Jeremy caught a big fish.
I caught a cold.

Jeremy went home to eat his fish dinner.
I went home to eat medicine.

Jeremy stayed up late and told fishing stories.
I went to bed.

Monday Jeremy went to school.
I stayed home and played.

Jeremy had to take a test.
I watched T.V.

After school Jeremy had to do homework.
I read comic books.

Jeremy had to eat his vegetables.
I said I was too sick for vegetables.

Jeremy came to visit me.
I was happy to see him.
Jeremy told me I was lucky to be sick.
I told Jeremy he was lucky to catch three fish.

Jeremy gave me his little fish.
[And] I gave Jeremy my cold.

What goes around, comes around. So, why not answer Christ's call?

Live the life of a disciple! Reap the rewards! Receive others as Christ received them, and you will receive Christ, and you will have a new awareness of service, and experience the joy of service, and you will answer Christ's call, and what goes around, WILL come around!

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Genesis 22:1-14
The first lesson is about divine testing. Genesis 22 is the story of how God tested Abraham in commanding the sacrifice of Isaac.

Psalm 13

Psalm 13 is a lament that provides liturgical language for how we approach God during times of testing.

Romans 6:12-23

In the second lesson, Paul ponders the meaning of Christian freedom.

Matthew 10:40-42

The gospel lesson advances the focus of the gospel lessons of the past two weeks, by moving to the image of receiving Christ and his followers. Here, Matthew declares the value of righteousness, which, according to Matthew, is living according to God's standards.

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Proper 13
Date: 01 August 1999
Title: “Nearer to God”
Text: Genesis 32:22-31 and 28:10-17

The story of Jacob is a remarkable story. I heartily recommend that you read the entire story sometime as it is found in chapters 25 through 36 in the book of Genesis. It is an intimate family portrait, put together with great skill. All the inner conflicts of jealousy, hatred and power, are sharply contrasted with the enabling power of love and forgiveness. It is a great story! Perhaps the greatest thing about it is the wonderful and powerful disclosure of new knowledge: God does work on people, and God works through people.

Can we draw a mental picture of Jacob? He was a primitive man who lived nearly as close to the Stone Age as to our age. Can we picture him in a desolate and wild and dangerous land? He was a burdened man, a remorseful man, a guilty man, a lonely man!

In today's lesson we find him wrestling. Who was his antagonist? Not a human foe! And yet, the opponents are evenly matched and fight on until dawn. Jacob is forced to make his reckoning and, as we read, we find that he may have been struggling mostly with himself.

When I read about Jacob's struggle, I automatically tie it to his dream. This burdened, remorseful, guilty, lonely person may not have deserved one, but he sure needed a dream.

Before we climb Jacob's ladder, however, let us consider what history and science have taught us about the things Jacob experienced according to this remarkable story.
It is only since the time of Aristotle, that is since the fourth century BCE, that human beings have had any awareness of their dreams while they were dreaming. This insight first came from a man, who was, as far as thinking is concerned, centuries ahead of his contemporaries. Before the fourth century BCE, dreams probably seemed to be as real as anything of which a person was conscious. They still are in some ways. Consider, for instance, how real dreams are to young children. How does a twentieth-century parent explain to a pre-school child that what the child just dreamed is not real? My own experiences as a parent remind me of a story of a little boy who, after waking from a scary dream, was comforted by his mother who tucked him back into bed, and with a soft, gentle voice reassured him that he should not worry. "You're not alone. Don't worry. God is always close by; you're not alone. Now, go back to sleep." Five minutes later, the little voice cried out again, "Mom! Dad!" "What is it now, Son?" "I know I'm not alone, but right now I need somebody with skin on."

What was a dream to Jacob, some four thousand years ago? What was an angel? What was God? It is difficult to imagine! And yet, within that primitive man there lived an inner hunger as contemporary as any inner hunger of any person alive today—the inner need and the personal drive to get in touch with God.

Awaking suddenly, Jacob cried out, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not." As a primitive man, he realized that, although he was alone, he was not solitary. Is it any wonder, then, that the story of Jacob's ladder often becomes a favorite story of little children! Who among us does not remember the words and tune of the Sunday School song, "We are climbing Jacob's Ladder?"

When we find ourselves wrestling with life's problems, how can we realize God's presence? How can we deal creatively with our lives, even with our shattered dreams and with all the trials life brings to us that our self-assurance cannot match? We have our dreams, yes. We also have prayer, meditation, and worship, all of which remind us that our capacity to deal creatively with our lives and with all that we carry here each week, is determined by our faith in God, and the faith that beyond these times there is a Spirit, and that beyond this life is a greater Life.

Though like the wanderer,
The sun gone down,
Darkness be over me,
My rest a stone:
Yet in my dreams I'd be
Nearer, my God, to Thee....
Nearer to Thee.
Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

GENESIS 32:22-31
The first lesson is the account of Jacob's wrestling match at the Jabbok River. We learn hear of the transformation of Jacob’s character and of his experience of God's grace.

PSALM 17:1-9, 15.

Psalm 17 is a psalm of lament that ends with words of confidence.

ROMANS 9:1-5

The second lesson is Paul's meditation on the faithfulness of God in relation to humanity, especially the people of Israel. The opening verses of this section of Romans include very personal remarks from Paul.

MATTHEW 14:13-21

The gospel lesson is well known to each of us. Here we learn of the degree of God's grace, but in terms of how Jesus turns the problem of the crowd into a problem for the disciples.

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Proper 14
Date: 08 August 1999
Title: “Rescue at Sea”
Text: Matthew 14:22-33

This just in from the newsroom! Journalists covering the activities of the prophet, Jesus, and his disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, report there is evidence that the popular religious leader cannot swim. We will have the complete story on the ten o'clock nightly report.

In 1997, I preached on the parallel text from the gospel of John, which is considerably more mysterious than the account we have today from the gospel of Matthew. This morning I will dispense with the usual, perhaps anticipated, walking on water jokes and explanations about shallow water, or stumps or rocks just beneath the surface. I am also going to dismiss the idea that this may be a post-Easter story mistakenly placed in the context of Jesus’ ministry prior to his death, which some Biblical scholars declare. I am also going to ignore the fact that Luke does not include this story in his gospel, indicating that, as scholars have pointed out, this story was difficult to interpret even for some first-century believers.

I am also going to avoid getting into the science of this story, and the rationalizing explanations, as well as the placement of the story in the narrative, so that we may concentrate, instead, on the power of this story.

First, to set the scene, I would like to read a poem I wrote years ago that was published in 1996 in a North American anthology of poetry, titled, *Carvings In Stone*. The poem is titled,
"A Sailor's Prayer," and reflects my experiences as a sailor and my acquaintances with Icelandic fisherman who often joked that although they prayed to Christ on land, at sea they prayed to Thor, the Nordic god of legend and song.

A sailor on a stormy night
Might have Thor in mind
  more than gods reasonable and kind;
His rhyme, rhythm and reason
  transcending both tide and season
To settle, now up, now down,
  with each uncertain moment
Sown by the sea foam in inky furrows
  plowed between now and nothing.

Now, back to our story. This morning I invite you to join me in refusing to admit that this story goes beyond what most people are prepared to believe or are able to understand.

Jesus told his disciples to cross the sea. Jesus dismissed the crowds. He went up the mountain to pray. The disciples were caught at sea in heavy winds and threatening waves, and Jesus performed a dramatic rescue with a powerful exercise of his authority, revealing not only an authority over the elements of nature, but also a bold revelation of divine power.

Matthew's account of this event, unlike those of John or Mark, does not leave the reader wondering about the source of Jesus’ amazing authority.

Consider what happens, once again. After Jesus sends away the disciples and the crowds, and before we see him walking on the water, Matthew tells us that Jesus went off alone to pray. Once again, as Jesus turns away from the people who come to him because of his power, he turns to God, the real source of his power, BEFORE he comes to those in peril who have need of his saving presence and power. This is the first scene of the two-part drama.

The second scene contrasts the power of Jesus with the lack of faith and lack of power of the disciples. The disciples are incapable of withstanding the chaotic forces of nature. When Jesus comes to them, they are so full of fear that they do not recognize him. They think he is a ghost, which portrays for us the superstition that ruled their lives instead of a true faith in God.

Jesus prays, but the disciples yell and scream. Jesus draws on the power of God, but the disciples, overcome by their sense of inadequacy, collapse into a helpless and hopeless bunch of cowards. One of the disciples, however, the good-old-boy Peter, who had a habit of acting impulsively because of an obvious lack of ability in the area of rational thought, tries to duplicate what Jesus did. Initially, Peter is able to move like Jesus, but then, when his thought process caught up with his body movements and he focused on the chaos around him, he sank back into a worse state than he was in when he was in the boat yelling and
screaming. Again Peter turns to Jesus. "Lord, save me," he yells! And Jesus saves him. The story ends with Jesus saving all of the disciples.

With the winds calmed, back together in the boat with Jesus, the witless disciples regain their rightful minds and declare to Jesus, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Anyone who has been to sea, or, for that matter, anyone who has been caught in a storm on a lake, knows that a sense of one's inadequacies, even a reasonable sense of one's inadequacies in the face of the forces of nature, can lead to disaster. Our lack of power and lack of faith in such situations can lead us into a worse state than we are actually in.

What builds character in such a situation, instead of destroying it?

Recently I read Commander Lloyd Bucher's account of the incredible events concerning the capture of the USS Pueblo by the North Koreans in 1968, an event that occurred two years before I entered the Navy, which has always been fresh in my mind because I was engaged in the same type of work. Bucher described the beating he and his crew took from the tumultuous winter weather off North Korea's craggy coast. I would like to read to you one paragraph:

"Yet she gradually built up our confidence...."

We do not, unfortunately, find here a strong believer in God, but we do find a captain and an entire crew, who refused to be paralyzed by a sense of their inadequacies and the obvious inadequacies of their vessel.

The disciples cowered in their own sense of inadequacy, but Jesus built up their confidence. The faith and power of Jesus overcame the lack of faith and lack of power of the disciples. The quiet and confident prayer of Jesus overcame the yelling and screaming of the disciples, so that when the storm finally broke, and their wits were re-gathered, the disciples knew for sure that the power they experienced through Jesus came from God.
And with one voice they declared, "Truly you are the Son of God."

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-36

The Old Testament lesson explores the power of God in history. The story of Joseph reminds us of the power of evil. Here, oppression is not a problem "out there" with the Egyptians. Rather, it is a problem that can actually begin with the people of God themselves.

Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b

Psalm 105 reviews Israel's entire history of salvation.

Romans 10:5-15

In the second lesson, Paul describes the universal promise of salvation. Most of us will probably find this to be a rather difficult discussion of God's relationship to Israel in light of the Christ event.

Matthew 14:22-33

The gospel lesson this morning, which follows the feeding of the five thousand, describes the amazing authority of Jesus Christ.

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Proper 15
Date: 15 August 1999
Title: “The Hidden-ness of God”
Text: Genesis 45:4-20

After being wowed by the gospel lessons of the past several weeks, in which the awesome power of God is revealed through the ministry of Jesus, I am returning this week to the Genesis story about Jacob's family--Jacob's dysfunctional family.

Today, we would call this story “The Joseph Story,” because our attention no longer rests on his father Jacob, but the family is the same, and it is still dysfunctional.

As I have mentioned during the past two weeks, we have here a family story. It is, however, remarkably different from other ancestral stories that we find in the Old Testament. Here we find, in fact, something new for the whole book of Genesis: the love of brother for brother, the love of sibling for sibling.
So far, in Genesis, other human relationships have been emphasized and made beautiful: the love of a man for a woman, as between Abraham and Sarah, and Jacob and Rachel; the love of father and son, as with Abraham and Isaac, and Jacob and Joseph; the love of mother and child, as with Hagar and Ishmael, and Rebecca and Jacob. But brother has not yet been pictured as devoted to another brother; not Ishmael and Isaac, that's for sure; nor Esau and Jacob, that's for sure; nor with Jacob's older sons. The new thing we learn here (see chapter 43) is that Joseph loves his brother Benjamin; he did as a child, and he still does.

After Joseph meets his brothers he does not immediately disclose his true identity. He toys around with his brothers with the trickery of an impish little brother, and, as Joseph intended, the treachery of his brothers is revealed.

Ultimately, the story is completed with the family being once again united in Goshen, and the movement in this story toward family unity is remarkable.

But where is God in this story? When Joseph finally comes clean with his brothers and states to them that what they meant for evil, God had meant for good, where exactly do we find God? Where does God enter this story?

There is a great play on the fact that proper human action is necessary for good in this world, but where is God in this drama? There is clear evidence of ethical transformation in this story, and it makes the reader feel good, but where is revelation? Where do we see God's guiding hand?

As spectators, we probably feel good about this story's ending, but we probably do not sense God's entrances into this narrative, because they are so subtle; there is nothing startling to report except for the timing of Joseph's insight, after he toys with his entire Canaanite family and, finally, reveals his true identity. Then, the story takes a new direction. God enters the story precisely at that moment when Joseph also undergoes a transformation from being a powerful Egyptian statesman to being a brother and a son once again.

"Remember your little brother, Joseph, whom you sold into slavery," he says to his older brothers? "Well, you're looking at him right here, dudes."

The entrance of God is still not clear, however, because we have yet to determine, from the story, whether Joseph's decision to make himself known to his brothers allowed him to see clearly the hand of God in his life's story, or whether it was just the reverse—namely, that seeing God's hand in his life's story gave Joseph the freedom to become a brother again. But this does not really matter, because the end result is the same. The power of God's promise breaks into this story either way and pushes the narrative in a new direction toward family unity.

How has the hidden-ness of God affected your life? How have your dreams and hopes and aspirations revealed God's will? How do you see God at work through the ordinary events of family life?
As we search our lives, have the events of family life made us callous, or have we, like Joseph, learned that the great affections we have toward one another are, beyond all other things, supremely worth preserving?

Joseph must have been astounded to learn that his brothers had tripped into his court. [Where are these people from? How many brothers are there? What is their father's name? O my God! This can't be!]

He had so many reasons to make them pay for what they did to him, but his affection for his family is so clean and true that the only thing he is concerned with is to forgive and to restore. And he asked his brothers what he wanted to know most of all: "Is my father still alive?" And to his older brothers who wronged him--who once came close to murdering him--he said, "I am Joseph your BROTHER."

The power of God may often seem hidden if we do not expect to see it in ordinary events—events that make community possible and unity evident.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

GENESIS 45:4-20

In the first lesson, my sermon text this morning, Joseph provides his brothers with an interpretation of the events that have befallen him and them.

PSALM 133

Psalm 133 celebrates kinship and life in community. The blessing of God makes community possible and is evident in the unity of the community.

ROMANS 11:1-2a, 29-32

Both of the New Testament lessons this morning deal with the grace of God that extends universally to all humanity through Jesus Christ.

MATTHEW 15:21-28

In the gospel lesson we find Jesus moving out of his normal locale into the coastal border zone of Tyre and Sidon. There, a non-Jewish woman does an amazing thing.

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Proper 16
Date: 22 August 1999
Title: “An Unlikely Cast of Characters”
Text: Exodus 1:8-2:10
Surely one of the most interesting stories in the book of Exodus concerns the efforts to save the life of a child. We think we know why the mother tried to save her son from Pharaoh's death command, but the story tells more. "When she saw how healthy he was..." the story explains, she was driven to extreme measures. The implication is that to lose a frail child would be bad enough, but to loose such a healthy child would be unbearable. As we read this, we also realize the author is telling us that this child was no ordinary child.

This is an extraordinary beginning of a story about an extraordinary person.

Perhaps all of us have looked at infants, our own as well as other babies, and have speculated about their futures. Friends of ours had a strapping baby, with a big thick neck and broad shoulders; obviously, he would become a football star. Because we lived in Wisconsin at the time, he would play for the Green Bay Packers, for sure!

Another set of parents had a long, slender child, and everyone thought--basketball star!

All infants are adorable but some are so beautiful that the child's appearance is all that his or her admirers can talk about: "Oh he's so adorable!" Some babies, however--well--oh my--uh--whew--we see them, and we really struggle to find something nice to say.

Back to our story! After three months, the baby's mother could no longer conceal him. Were his cries too loud? We don't know. We know that she prepared a basket in which she set the child out into the river. The writer portrays the intense care with which the basket was prepared to prevent it from leaking--it even had a top--and the mother placed it at the edge of the riverbank. The mother's young daughter stood by at a distance "to see what would be done to him." Why did the mother do what she did, and why was the daughter watching? We still do not know?

We are on the edge of our seats here, because we know something is going to happen. The appearance of the daughter in the scene, tempers the harshness of the exposure of the baby, because she keeps watch at a distance.

Suddenly we become aware of the mother's plot. Pharaoh's daughter comes down to the river for her routine bath, sees the basket, and discovers the baby. The sister appears instantly to negotiate a Hebrew wet nurse. Not only is the child saved and returned to his mother with royal protection, but the infant's mother is even paid for taking care of her own child. Such a deal!

What is the writer of this story trying to accomplish? Is this a form of irony being directed toward the Egyptians? Probably not! We have here an unfavorable portrayal of the Pharaoh contrasted with the favorable portrayal of the Egyptian princess, Pharaoh's daughter, so we are not dealing with irony here, just contrast.
The princess is touched immediately by the sight of the crying baby in the basket. Although she recognizes that he is a Hebrew child, which ties the story back to the decree of the king, she does not hesitate to offer the child protection. In fact, the child is not only rescued, but adopted into the royal household as her son.

Once again Pharaoh's plan has been thwarted, and in a doubly miraculous way. The child has been rescued from exposure by the very daughter of the one who made the decree.

God's plan for his people rested on the helpless child, floating down the river, but the child is not lost, and the story points expectantly toward the future. What will become of this child on whom such special care has been lavished? Well, something great, that's for sure. This child is going to be a “somebody!”

I am certain that I am not the only Christian here this morning who has pushed his or her thoughts expectantly toward the future, and toward the New Testament. In the New Testament, Matthew uses the Moses birth story extensively in his account of the visit of the Magi and Herod's attempt to destroy the promised Messiah. Although there are no explicit quotations in Matthew from the book of Exodus, the connection is obvious. The content of both stories and the sequences are parallel. Both stories have to do with the birth of a young male child, whose life is threatened by the ruling monarch, at first secretly, but later in open hostility. Both children are rescued just in the nick of time, but the other children are slaughtered in a vain effort to remove the imagined threat. These are very fragile beginnings, especially for the life of a Savior.

How often God's plan for his people has had a very fragile beginning! Surely, we should stop to ponder why and how often God's intervention in the world around us hangs on such a thin thread. Isn't God taking an enormous risk to let everything ride on two helpless midwives and a frail little ark as protection from the sea, or, in the case of Jesus' family, a last-minute, frantic escape to Egypt to save their child from Herod? In contrast to this enormous risk of God, who uses such an unlikely cast of characters, are the power and the powers of this world that seem so impressive and invulnerable. Surely, the rulers of this world can unleash their power against such frail beginnings.

Pharaoh senses a threat and devises his plan long before the Hebrews are in the least prepared to resist. In the New Testament, the Magi appear naive and powerless before the scheming intrigue of King Herod. But, in both cases, when the secret plans fail, the ungloved fist of God is ready in an instant to strike, and, as a result, in both stories, there is a wonderfully unexpected rescue from a humanly impossible situation.

The Exodus writer delights in the rescue by Pharaoh's daughter, and so do we! The writer marvels at the mystery of God's work, and so do we!

And so it is this morning that we explore a wonderful story, which continues to provide the basic context for the Church's hope. The story of Moses, as the story of a type of Messiah, who would save God's people, points to a future Messiah, who will fulfill God’s promises to Israel. He will come also as a human child, to human parents, in an historical setting.
You see, God’s work always demands an historical context. The coming of God into our lives is not a mythological drama; it is a real-life drama often involving enormous risks, with last minute, daredevil acts, all dangling from a very thin thread. This is to say that the coming of God into our lives is not imagined; it is experienced.

So it is, then, that this story of a struggle to save a life, urges us both to rejoice in the outcome of this story and to endure our own struggles for life, and, as it does this, it provides for us the context of what we call hope.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Exodus 1:8-2:10

The first lesson, which is my sermon text this morning, explores the power of salvation. Here Moses is introduced as the central human character in the book of Exodus story.

Psalm 124

Psalm 124 turns the insights gained from the introductory stories in Exodus into the language of praise.

Romans 12:1-8

Both New Testament lessons treat practical matters of daily Christian life, though in different ways. Paul’s urgent message calls believers to physical service as an expression of their gratitude to and adoration of God. It is common service that unites us as believers.

Matthew 16:13-20

In Jesus’ words to Peter we learn that God empowers each of us for service, and grants us the confidence that the God who directs and inspires us to service is with us in our ministry, regardless of any and all difficulties.

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Proper 17
Date: 29 August 1999
Title: “Put Off Thy Shoes”
Text: Exodus: 3:1-15

There are many things in life that we can do without. Likewise, there are many things we cannot do without. For people of faith, routine self-searching, and regular prayer and meditation, are things we cannot do without. We need, on a regular basis, time to get our hearts and minds back to their God-intended states, where we are normal, and healthy and
whole, all within the territory of God's grace. Before we set out on such an important task, however, we need to take steps that have a firm footing. Scripture often provides that firm footing, and today's lesson about the calling of Moses is one such passage.

The story of Moses' calling is one of the most dramatic scenes in all narrative art. Please join me in a spirit of meditation as I read a portion of the story once again in a different translation.

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock to the back of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo—behold, the bush was burning; yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt." When the Lord saw that Moses turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses said, "Here am I." Then God said, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

God then identifies himself and gives Moses some work to do. Moses, somewhat reluctantly, learns a great deal as the result of acting upon what I would call the human being's second of two basic impulses: the first basic impulse being to accept things as they are and take them for granted, and the second basic impulse being to look with inquiry and wonder.

Truthfully, I find some of the elements of this story so elementary that it reminds me of a mother trying to entice a young child to stop what he is doing and come inside for lunch. "Don't get any more toys out and don't go anywhere because I have lunch ready. I've fixed your favorite lunch, so, come on in and wash your hands."

The kid dashes into the kitchen only to be stopped by his mother who yells, "Wait a minute, you take off those muddy shoes before you come into my kitchen." This mother's kitchen is holy ground, and no muddy shoes are allowed, even if it is lunchtime.

The story of Moses' calling is in many ways a sermon on inquiry and wonder. It reminds us that before any of us can effectively act in response to God's will--before we can reflect upon it, or pray for a part in it--there is that moment when we must come to know for certain where we are, and, as it were, take off our shoes--we need to stop our inquiry and wonder for a moment and "get some reverence."

How do we respond to God's will? With what kind of reverence do we approach God?

Elizabeth Browning once wrote a satirical little poem using the imagery from today's scripture lesson:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.

With what kind of reverence do we approach God?

If you ever visit a Mohammedan mosque, you will be asked to remove your shoes as a sign of reverence and awe. The reasons for doing so are religious, not moral. The mood in such a place is to be one of wonder and reverence and awe, which distinguishes religion from morals.

What does it mean to remove one's shoes in such a place? Well, this is a ritual. Therefore, it does not need to be explained.

Why do men usually remove their hats when they enter a Christian place of worship? Because it is a ritual! Words cannot explain what such a ritual means. The ritual is simply an attempt to say something, or shall we say express something, which cannot otherwise be wholly explained.

Rites and rituals alone, however, do not make for reverence, because reverence is the response of not only our bodies in the way of gestures, but also the response of our souls to lofty mysteries, deeply felt and only partially understood.

Therefore, I will close with a simple question for you to ponder during the week ahead. How do YOU approach God?

Let us pray.

O God our Father, as we depart from this place, back out into the busy world, enable us to do more perfectly the work to which you have called us. Show us the joy of reverent praise, that we may praise you all our days with a whole heart, an inquiring mind and a sense of wonder, and live to glorify your name for evermore. In your name we pray, and for the sake of your Kingdom. Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Exodus 3:1-15

The first lesson describes the call of Moses, which ends with the revelation of the divine name.

Psalm 105:1-6,23,26, 45b.

Psalm 105 is an historical hymn of praise that recounts Israel's oppression in Egypt and the calling of Moses and Aaron to save the people of Israel.

Romans 12:9-21
The second lesson from Romans advocates a genuine Christian lifestyle based on full confidence in God.

Matthew 16:21-28

Today's gospel reading focuses on two related passages concerned with the character of Christ's ministry and the character of discipleship.

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Proper 19
Date: 12 September 1999
Title: “A Very Clear Lesson”
Text: Matthew 18:21-35

The lesson in today's gospel reading is so clear that it really needs no sermon to explain it. Christians are to forgive one another. Furthermore, forgiveness is a two-way street: if we want to experience forgiveness, then we must be forgiving. If we are not forgiving, then not only should we not expect to be forgiven, but we are also in big trouble.

The ending of today's parable is very harsh. In a sense it is very unforgiving to those who are unforgiving, which might seem confusing.

Because the lesson of this parable is so direct and so clear, and in its clearness, so disturbing, this parable is often turned into a moral lesson, that is, as if it were one of Aesop's fables. This morning I invite you to join me in avoiding this temptation.

First of all, forgiveness, that is, genuine forgiveness, is not just excusing someone for what that person did. When a person says, "excuse me," we might reply, "you are excused," but not, "you are forgiven." There is a difference. Some actions are inexcusable, that's why we have prisons, but it is difficult to imagine an action that would be unforgivable, until we read today's parable.

When it comes to forgiving others, most of us would probably think that Peter's quick reply to Jesus would be warmly commended. (How many times have we forgiven others three times, let alone seven?) The Jewish teaching of the times was that one should forgive one's neighbor at least three times, but we should not be expected to do so more than three times. This teaching comes from the book of Amos. Since it was not expected that a person could be more generous than God, forgiveness was limited to three times.

Peter rushed in to answer Jesus’ question with a generous reply; he went even further than was expected; he multiplied the limit by two and for good measure adds one more. Peter, with his characteristic eager self-satisfaction, claims that it will certainly be enough if he forgives seven times. "Wrong," says Jesus! "Try seventy times seven,” which did not mean
490, but stood for an unlimited number of times. Forgiveness is to have no computable limit.

Jesus then told Peter and the others the parable. I wonder how quiet they were after Jesus told the story?

As I consider the contrast between the two debts in the story--the one being unreasonably large, especially for a servant, and the other being so small--and place this contrast beside the sharp contrast here between excusing a person's actions and forgiving a person, I cannot help but reflect on a few articles I have read lately. Perhaps we could reflect for just a moment on the prison situation in our country today, just as a matter of illustration.

Decades ago, much was being done to rehabilitate prisoners. Those who were dependent upon drugs went to drug rehabilitation programs. Those who suffered from mental illness were counseled and treated, perhaps with medication, to help them cope with their illness, which is to say that mental illness was treated as an illness and not as a crime. Years ago states and many counties had mental hospitals and institutions to aid the mentally ill, but most of those institutions are gone. Where are the mentally ill now? They are either living next door to us or they are in jail!

Years ago, prisoners were allowed to take educational courses, even college courses. Some finished high school; some even received college degrees while in prison. Others learned vocations. Most were able to exercise and read books and magazines and watch television. The prison system then operated mainly with the understanding that someday most of the prisoners would be released back out into society. Therefore, in order to reduce the threat to society, whatever means were necessary to help the prisoner readjust to society were justifiable. The person needed to be able to make a living, for instance, otherwise he or she would be stealing when released. The person needed to be able to control his anger, fear, and anxiety, in order to avoid committing the same crimes over again. The person needed to be drug-free, sober, and proud of that accomplishment in order to remain drug free, in order to remain in control, in order to remain employed. Some prisoners could even earn money for their work while in prison, so that they would not be penniless when they were released. Society did not excuse them from the crimes they committed, but society did its best to forgive them to the point that something was done to help them when their prison terms were over. That was decades ago, when our society was more forgiving than it is today.

What about today? Do you know that the TVs, radios and stereos are gone in most prisons; the exercise and recreation facilities are gone; the libraries are gone; there are no more classes, no job training, no jobs, very little counseling, no drug rehabilitation programs. Prisoners spend most of their time in their cells. Prisoners are in jail to pay for their crimes. They are there to experience society's revenge, not society's forgiveness. Meanwhile, more and more people are being imprisoned. Because of mandatory terms and three-strikes-your-out laws, prisons are bursting at the seams. More and more prisons are being built. Prisons have become big business. The prison industrial complex is becoming nearly as big as the medical industrial complex, but without any measure of forgiveness, because the funding for rehabilitation has been completely cut. What do prisoners learn in such an unforgiving
environment? Nothing, except hate, loneliness, bitterness, hopelessness, and all the things that create criminal behavior in the first place! When they get out, look out! And most of them will eventually get out. What kind of people will they be if they have not experienced any forgiveness for years and years? Can society expect them to be forgiving if they have experienced no forgiveness?

My point is not one concerning the state of the nation’s prison systems. My concern this morning is not prison reform. My concern this morning is much more basic; my concern is the necessity of forgiveness in every walk of life. Where forgiveness is not offered, it cannot be expected!

Not too long ago, I heard Robert Schuller tell a story—a modern parable. A little boy went into his father’s shop, retrieved a hammer and some large nails, and proceeded to drive a nail into the wooden arm of a beautiful antique chair in the living room. His mother spanked him and sent him to his room until his father came home. When the father got home, he went into the boy’s room where he found the boy crying. He hugged his son and asked if he had learned a lesson. His son said yes, and that he was sorry, and then he asked his dad to forgive him, and assured his dad that he would never do what he did again. His dad said to him, "I forgive you son, but what about the nail hole in the chair?"

There was no excuse for what the child did, but he still needed forgiveness just as much as anyone else in his family, and perhaps even more.

There may be strict limits as to the number of nail holes that are allowed in living room furniture, but there is no computable limit to forgiveness.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Exodus 14:19-31

The first lesson is the account of how God rescued Israel from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, or Reed Sea.

Psalm 114

Psalm 114 celebrates the Exodus event.

Romans 14:1-12

In the second lesson, Paul works to establish the basis of Christians accepting other believers who are markedly different in their patterns of piety.

Matthew 18:21-35

The gospel lesson, which is my sermon text this morning, takes up the theme of forgiveness, making the point that we are to be boundless and Godlike in extending grace to others.
Most of the parables have a focused setting. Therefore, when we read them, we have some idea of the point Jesus was making. Today's parable is not highly focused, and for this reason, among others, it may seem baffling. Perhaps the thing that troubles us the most, is the inconsistency. If we are honest, we understand the complaints of the all-day workers better than the actions of the owner. A child in kindergarten has a better grasp of what fairness is than the vineyard owner!

In this light, perhaps we would best avoid jumping to conclusions about what this parable might mean to us today, and start with what Jesus might have been trying to teach his disciples. If we think of this story as one told to his disciples, Jesus was obviously warning them about something. He is saying, "You have received a great privilege by coming into the Christian Church and fellowship right at the beginning of it. The time will come however, when others will be joining. As this happens, don't get all puffed up, because all people, no matter when they come, will be equally precious and valuable to God."

I well remember one church I served where I tried to invoke a policy that worked very well in the previous church I served; that every new member be encouraged to accept a nomination to a board or committee during their first year of membership. The long-time members of my newer congregation, however, made it very clear that they did not want any new church members on boards or committees. New members had to prove themselves first. Because some new members were eager to serve, and did not find the opportunity to do so, they proved themselves all right; they proved themselves right over to another church.

As we understand the parable in this way, we can also appreciate the warning that Jesus was making to the Jews. He, as a Jew, knew, as every Jew knew, that they were the chosen people of God. As a consequence, they looked down on the Gentiles. They often hated and despised them. If gentiles were to be allowed into the fellowship, then what kind of members would they be? Would they be the same as the other members? "Yes! They would," says Jesus. In God's economy, as someone has said, there is no such thing as a most favored nation clause.

Even today, we have much to learn about latecomers to the fellowship of the faith. The grace that is available to us who worship regularly and who have done so all our lives, who have raised our children in the Church, and have been generous with our gifts as well as our talents and our service, is just as available to someone who has never crossed the threshold of a church building.
Is that fair? Not at all! No. That is not fair!

Is that generous? Yes, and it is generous to the point of being ridiculously inconsistent in a world where we seldom even get what we bargain for.

What then about the generosity of God? In years past, when the United States of America all of a sudden discovered that it had women in the working force, we heard a great deal about equal pay for equal work. Forget that argument here. It won't work here. All service ranks the same. The amount doesn't count, just the love it is given with. No one can earn what God gives us. No one can deserve what God gives us. What God gives, is not pay; it is a gift.

During the past year, Mary and I have reorganized Allen's room a number of times, with Allen's permission, and last Spring I completely redecorated it. The treasures we stumbled across were priceless—in desk drawers and in his chest of drawers—otherwise insignificant gifts that, because of the love with which they were given, were tucked away together for safe keeping, ready to invoke a memory of a special event or episode in life when they should be re-discovered.

When he left for Italy [to study there during his senior year at Iowa State University], he entrusted us with a special small box of keepsakes, to keep safe at home until he returned.

Likewise, Mary and I have cherished the small gifts Allen has given to us over the years, like the His and Her coffee mugs we received one Christmas, which we still use, for which Allen laboriously and lovingly saved his own money to purchase when he was in grammar school.

It is not the amount of the gift that matters at all. Many things with little value of their own touch our hearts in ways immeasurable. We cannot earn such gifts and we certainly do not deserve them. The generosity of God's grace is like that. It is not a reward; it is grace! It is not pay; it is a gift!

Here, I think, we have also made a connection between the generosity of God and the compassion of God.

I cannot read this parable, with the social consciousness that I have, without noting the generous amount of human tenderness that is portrayed here. There are few things more tragic in this world than a person who needs work to suffer unemployment. In today's economy, so many people are rusting away in idleness, because there is no work for them to do.

Almost as tragic, is to watch people eking out a living with some endlessly monotonous entry-level job with no benefits and no future and hardly enough take-home pay to pay for childcare. So, I rejoice when, at the end of the day, the vineyard owner reached out to the unemployed; to people who had not found any work that day. They, too, could take care of their families. What generous compassion!
Was he fair to the other workers? No! Obviously, he was not fair. Some got paid at the end of the day, because they had bargained for their pay. Others got a gift. Was that fair? No! Was that compassionate? Yes! Was that generous? Yes!!

I still think we can be baffled by this parable, however, if we don't cut through the bewildering compassion and the unfair generosity of this story to get to the underlying comfort in this parable--the comfort in the message about God's economy, where there are no favorites, just workers, just people who serve, just people who give and care, whether they are old or new or in between. They all are equally precious to God. Whether they end their lives full of years and full of honor, or before the door of life and achievement is ever opened, such as the youths whose lives were snuffed out by a madman in Fortworth Texas this past week. They will receive the same welcome, and for neither, in God's grace and love, has life ended too soon or too late. Does that always seem fair? No! But is that compassionate? Is that generous? Yes!!

Therefore, even though this parable may trouble us, it asks us to be freed by the good news of God's generosity, and it asks us to let God be free to love us.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Exodus 16:2-15

The first lesson is the account of how Israel was miraculously fed manna by God in the wilderness.

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

Psalm 105, part of which we read not long ago, is a hymn that praises God who cares for Israel on the wilderness journey.

Philippians 1:21-30

The second lesson, from Paul's letter to the Philippians, reminds us that things are not always as they seem, especially if we try viewing them from a theological point of view.

Matthew 20:1-16

The gospel lesson is a parable about dealing with God. It spins a telling story about who God really is and who we all too often are.

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The Old Testament lesson this morning is one of the earliest wilderness stories. The Lord has delivered Israel from Egypt, and the once enslaved people now have the responsibility of political freedom. Their freedom, however, is a mixed blessing. They may be free, but they are still a people at risk. They are, as it were, in training—in a kind of boot camp. They thought they had been saved, but now they are asking themselves, "Saved from what?"

Were they saved from Egypt so that they could be free to die in the wilderness? What kind of freedom is that? What kind of salvation is that?

Like the story of the gift of manna, which we read last week, there is some serious testing going on here. In the manna story, God is testing the people. Today, however, we find the people testing God. "Is the Lord among us or not," they ask? Surely, there are times in our own lives when we test God with some form of that same question!

One of my favorite Dennis the Menace cartoons is a series of frames depicting Dennis as he is saying his bedtime prayers. He is pictured kneeling beside his bed, hands folded in a prayerful pose. The caption reads, "Testing, one, two, three...."

Do we test God? In times of serious decision making, do we ever murmur something like, "Lord, are you with me on this or not? So far, I can't tell if you heard my prayer or not."

Our doubt can be bold or timid. Even with Dennis's words, we can say them boldly or timidly, such as shouting, "TESTING, ONE, TWO, THREE," as if we expect the connection to work. Or we can mutter them softly, with less assurance—"testing, one, two, three?"—almost afraid to make a connection.

"Is the Lord among us or not?"

I suppose we could respond to this question by saying that such a question shows a very clear lack of faith. And yet, as people of faith, surely we know that God does not promise us what we want. There is no objective proof that God gives people what they want. We might expect certainty, and demand proof from God, but our expectations and demands are in vain.

Is God with us or not? As far as our expectations and demands are concerned, we really do not know. Who are we to demand proof from God? We can't even prove God. We can only know God. Where do we get to know God best? In times of plenty? Perhaps, but that is not as likely as in times of need. Knowledge and proof are two different things, just as evidence and proof are two very different things in a court of law. "Lord, are you with me or not?" is a very honest question in times of need.

"Testing: One. Two. Three. I'm almost afraid to ask, but I'd still like to know. Are you with me or not?"
We have probably been told a thousand times that there is no such thing as an impossible situation. We know better, though, because we've been there. We are here today, because we have attacked the impossible.

I wonder how many times during my years and years of schooling I faced what I would call near paralysis while taking an exam. Essay questions were especially deadly to me, and I often thought some questions could not be answered by anyone. Soon I learned to skip over such questions and come back to them, after I had finished with the easier ones. Then, I would go back and look at the impossible question again, and keep looking at it, and keep thinking about it, until, as it seemed, the answer sneaked in from nowhere, and, somehow, forgotten memories and ideas, that had never entered my conscious thoughts before, found new life.

The threshold of faith is not unlike the threshold of new thought. We find it most directly when our souls are thirsty, when are minds are taxed, when we stand squarely in front of a hopeless, solid mass of barren rock and a solution seems impossible, and we realize that life, while it is not as simple as a perpetual parade of happy expectations, is as basic as a friendship with God who continually surprises us, and consistently adds new wonder to our knowledge of his ways.

Testing: One. Two. Three. I KNOW you are there, God! THAT is why I am testing.

Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Exodus 17:1-7

The Old Testament Lesson is the first account of God providing Israel with water from a rock.

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

Psalm 78 is an historical psalm that recounts God's merciful guidance during Israel's wilderness wanderings.

Philippians 2:1-13

The lesson from Philippians issues a call to put others ahead of ourselves, and it informs us that such a life-style is Christ-like and made real by the work of God in our lives.

Matthew 21:23-32

The gospel text shows us Jesus debating with his opponents over what makes a person truly acceptable to God.
Proper 22  
World Communion Sunday  
Date: 03 October 1999  
Title: “Today’s Worldwide Event”  
Text: Matthew 21:33-43

Once again, Christians around the world are joining together in worldwide worship and reflecting upon the worldwide, ecumenical character of a worldwide communion. In particular, we are also celebrating the intercommunion of all the churches that participate in the World Council of Churches. Through our gifts, especially through what we give through the One Great Hour of Sharing offering, we actively participate in global ministries. This past year, you and I have given hope to people in Turkey who suffered a devastating earthquake. You and I have given hope to people in Bosnia, Greece, Taiwan, Uganda, the Dominican Republic, Columbia, Sudan, and Haiti, among others. Last year we were in Seattle, Washington, helping homeless families and street children. That's right—Seattle! There are homeless families in every major city in our country, and most of the poorest people in our nation, with our booming economy, are children. Where else were we last year? Bolivia, Cuba and Puerto Rico after hurricane George; Argentina, Tanzania, Uganda, Kosovo, and the Philippines, only to mention a few.

Where will we be next year, in the new millennium? Hopefully, wherever there is a need, because, the new and next millennium will be only what we make of it. After all, in spite of the scare tactics of media-conscious crackpots, the turn of a century or the turn of a millennium is only an arbitrary change of date.

Today, everything has a date attached to it. And yet, the way we date events is so strange. Where was Jesus born? Somewhere between 7 and 4 BCE!

The calendar helps us to remember things of the past and to plan for things in the future, but it is a tool for us to control, not something that should be controlling us.

"When can you come over for supper?" "Oh, let me look at my calendar." "How about this Friday night?" "What is the date?"

Do dates really matter to people who worship a God to whom a thousand years is but the blinking of an eye? Will the first year of the twenty-first century be much different from 1999? Hopefully it will be different in the way of being better. Whatever it will be, however, depends on what kind of people we will be, because there is no one and nothing that can change this world for the better except people like you and me.

As we celebrate this last Worldwide Communion Sunday of this century, during our harvest season in this country, I think it is interesting to reflect upon the gospel lesson for today. Those entrusted with the harvest, in this story, those upon whom so much attention and care
have been lavished, have proven themselves unworthy of the gift; they are unable to fulfill God's great expectations of them.

As in Jesus’ day, one of the biggest temptations for people was an attitude of self-righteous superiority. Governor Ventura of Minnesota discovered this truth this past week as he passed judgment on organized religion with the same intolerant and arrogant attitude found among many religious people. I'm sure we all have heard his much-quoted remark in a recent interview: "Organized religion is just a crutch for weak-minded people." My only comment about Governor Ventura is that he is a perfect example of how uninformed voters often elect the kind of politicians they deserve, rather than the kind of political leaders they need.

The stakes are the same for all of us, and the same dangers await all of us, said Jesus. All of us are entrusted with the harvest. The challenge is to recognize the gifts we have been given, and to live in such a way as to vindicate the giver.

Let us pray.

Creator God, on this last Worldwide Communion Sunday of this century, we give you thanks for blessing us with dreams and adventure, laughter and song, tears and compassion, imagination and perseverance, and especially for companions in our daily journeys who listen, and for communities where we are loved. Be alive among us this morning as we thoughtfully consider the wideness of your invitation to salvation and affirm the full participation and presence of all people in your human family. In the new century ahead of us and in the next millennium, embolden us to explore new ways of being and working when our circumstances change dramatically and we find ourselves in unfamiliar situations. Listen patiently to our frustration when we wrestle with the things that happen to us, to our loved ones, and to our world. Guide us in an understanding of you, not as a source of our troubles, but as our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble. May we who are made in your image, O God, mirror your compassion, creativity and imagination as we work to reshape the world around us for good. Send us into the world supported by your strength, enlivened by your Spirit, and accompanied by your son, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

The first lesson is the account of the revelation of divine law to Israel that occurred at Mount Sinai.

Psalm 19

Psalm 19 is a hymn in praise of the law.

Philippians 3:6-9 (4b-14)
The second lesson urges believers forward in faith and away from the lure of self-righteous contentment.

Matthew 21:33-43

The gospel lesson reminds us of the provisions of God, of our own stubbornness and insubordination, and of the relentlessness of God in calling us to obedience.

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Proper 23
Date: 10 October 1999
Title: “The Prepared Guest”
Text: Matthew 22:1-14

Many parables should not be interpreted allegorically, however, the parable in today’s gospel lesson is definitely an allegory. The king in the story stands for God. The people found in the highways and byways are the Gentiles. The invited guests are the children of Israel.

About the time that Matthew was writing, an interesting parallel story was written in the Jewish Talmud by a first century rabbi:

This may be compared to a king who summoned his servants to a banquet without appointing a time. The wise ones adorned themselves and sat at the door of the palace, for, they said, “Is anything lacking in a royal place?” The fools went about their work, saying, “Can there be a banquet without preparations?” Suddenly the king desired the presence of his servants: the wise entered adorned, while the fools entered soiled. The king rejoiced at the wise but was angry with the fools. “Those who adorned themselves for the banquet,” he ordered, “let them sit, eat and drink. But those who did not adorn themselves for the banquet, let them stand and watch.”

Invitations are often a problem! Perhaps many of us have been disappointed after accepting what appeared to be a generous invitation.

Years ago I was invited to have lunch with presidential candidate, Walter Mondale, who was campaigning in Burlington. I had invitations for two people, and since Mary could not attend, I invited a friend of mine to join me. We both shook the candidate’s hand at the rally, and then made our way to the elaborate luncheon. Can you understand my disappointment, when a person came to the microphone and announced that although several of Mr. Mondale’s aids would be present to talk to us during the luncheon, Mr. Mondale was behind schedule and could not attend? My friend, a busy attorney, who changed his schedule to go to lunch with me in order to meet Mr. Mondale, was cordial, but I was embarrassed.
The parable this morning also deals with the problem of having less than joyful responses to an open invitation. Years ago, on a cold autumn day, I happened to be at the front door of the Little Brown Church in the Vale, inviting the next wedding couple to come in out of the cold. "Come on in," I invited them, before the previous couple left, and, as I opened the door wider, a very plump field mouse scurried around them and rushed in before them. Everybody screamed.

With an open invitation, how does one let the good in and keep the bad out?

There is one more impression I am left with from Matthew's text. According to Jesus, when the king finally came into his party with those who had accepted his invitation (the good and the bad), he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. "Friend," he asked, "how did you get in here?" The man was speechless. To make a long story short, Matthew tells us that this man was thrown out.

I stumble over this passage, because I wonder if I am sometimes like the one who wants to come to the party but with no thought of responsibility in it and for it. The rejected man in the parable came unprepared for anything other than celebrating. He did not realize that he needed to respond to the open invitation with the proper attitude, which demanded more than just the proper attire, although the proper attire would certainly be an indication—a hint, a reflection—of a correct and suitable attitude.

I have known people who came to church like that: unprepared, unsuitable, sometimes improperly dressed according to most people's standards. They came to be entertained more than to participate in worship and Christian fellowship. They came to see what they could get out of the service, rather than to see what they could put into it. They would spend more time looking at what everybody else was wearing than in examining their own spiritual clothing. In short, they were not very good guests. Another example might be a family who, after a long absence from worship, came on a Sunday that included a potluck luncheon following worship, not bringing a dish to share, but just pretending they did not know about the luncheon.

Let's face it. Our world still makes light of the Good News of God. You can look anywhere and realize it. It is not just that the Gospel is ignored; even the governor of Minnesota ridicules it. People are frightened of religious expressions of faith, and in their fear they use ridicule. And those who do believe, sometimes become so defensive in their reactions to this indifference that they create their own idols, thinking that God in Christ needs their personal protection in order to survive. We hear preposterous phrases in the media: "We have thrown God out of the classroom;" "We have pushed God out of our children's lives by not having school prayer," and on and on, as though we little human beings can ever push God out of our lives.

Notice that our lesson this morning does not say that, because the invited guests did not come to the banquet, the wedding was canceled. No. The wedding and the feast went on as scheduled. The only thing that changed was the guest list.
God does not alter God's plans because of the indifference of human beings. God does not withdraw the feast. The choice is up to us; the choice is ours. It is we who accept or reject God’s invitation to joy.

The message of the parable is clear: We cannot use our families, or our work, or anything else as an excuse for staying away from God’s Kingdom. No excuse is acceptable when the offering is a matter of life and death. Our spiritual survival is at stake. And yet, so many people find excuses and are attracted by the affairs of the world more than by the needs of the human spirit.

"The world is too much with us." We are consumed by commerce; our lives are too busy and cluttered; our private worlds are too noisy to hear the invitation to a banquet of joy. And when we are reminded of the standing invitation, we are embarrassed. We have found other things to occupy our time and consume our energy.

And that brings us to the paradox of this invitation to a banquet of joy. The king’s servants invited both those who were good and those who were bad. They all were invited because of the generosity of the king, not because they had done something to deserve the invitation.

That is the invitation to us: to accept the invitation to God’s banquet of joy, which will change our sense of what is important and of value.

Why should we reject such an invitation? Let’s get dressed and let’s get over there!

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Proper 24
Title: “When You Find Yourself Between a Rock and a Hard Place”
Text: Exodus 33:12-23
Date: 17 October 1999

Moses has pitched the tent of meeting, a place where people could seek God, outside the camp. The golden calf incident has driven a wedge between God and God’s people and between Moses and the people. Moses is, as it were, between a rock and a hard place. So, he now seeks to know God better. Is it too late?

WE CAN get ourselves into some real “jams” in life, can’t we?

A few years ago, Allen was driving home late one night, after closing the Hardees Restaurant in Charles City, where he worked. Just as he approached Nashua, traveling, I assume, at his accustomed speed, which is about mach 2, the “check engine” light went on, but he was so close to home that he thought he would just drive the rest of the way and then tell me about the light when he got home. A few blocks later, however, all the
red lights on the dashboard came on and there was a sudden exploding sound, as a rod shot out through the engine wall, followed by a silence, through which he steered the dead front-wheel-drive car to the side of the road without the help of power steering. He telephoned from the Casey’s General Store and gas station nearby to report the catastrophe. I picked him up in another car and we left the dead one where it died until morning. When pressed for an explanation, Allen really did not have one. This was not the first motor vehicle that self-destructed in front of him or around him; it was the third vehicle in as many years.

Why, in the short span of three years could he not learn that when all of the red lights are flickering he should come to a complete stop, then and there? Did he check the oil the last time he got gas? Who knows? Yes, the check engine light came on quite often in that car, but, obviously, this was not the night to ignore it. Allen, to put it mildly, had put himself between the proverbial “rock and a hard place.” (Not that he is a stranger to those parts. Nor am I.)

We, all of us, have probably been there. You know where I mean--that “place” where we find ourselves occasionally, and probably more often than we would admit: embarrassed, shamefaced or guilty-looking, trying to please everybody and failing miserably, determined to move in the “right” direction, only to become paralyzed in the “wrong” one; terribly vulnerable and unsure; in short, “caught between a rock and a hard place” with no place to go to get out of the way--vulnerable and exposed for all to see.

Between a rock and a hard place is where we sometimes find ourselves!

Have you ever gone to a very nice restaurant, and splurged, only to find out AFTER the dinner that the restaurant takes no credit cards, and the bill is ten dollars more than what you have in your wallet, and you didn’t bring the checkbook?

Have you ever been pulled over by a friendly State Trooper for speeding “just a little,” who was nice enough to tell you that he was only going to give you a warning, but, as he examined your driver’s license, he informed you, rather coolly, that your license expired last year?

Have you ever “laid down the law” to a teenager, to the point that one more reckless incident with a motor vehicle and he will be grounded for the rest of his dependent life, and then the “one more” infraction occurs?

Have you ever gone to a physician for one particular minor health problem and been told that you had two or three more problems that were much more serious?

Have you ever fought an addiction, and won, only to be continually tempted?

And so it goes. We are well acquainted with places that are “between a rock and a hard place.”
So was Moses.

During the past months, we have followed him, from his birth, through his call to lead the Hebrews. We have followed him calling down the plagues, marching across the Red Sea, wandering around the Sinai Peninsula, and climbing up the holy mountain to bring down the Ten Commandments. Moses didn’t have an easy time of it, mainly because the Children of Israel continued to sin and grumble and complain all the way.

In Exodus 33 we read that God is angry with the Hebrews. This time they had really done it. They had made a cast image and worshipped it. They had turned their earrings into a calf. And then they broke the first commandment by bowing down to it. God was so mad that God said to Moses, “Look, I am not going with this people into the Promised Land. So, you go. You take them, because I cannot stomach these people any more.”

Moses found himself “between a rock and a hard place”.

On one side is the stubborn Children of Israel, and on the other side is the demanding Lord God who commands them forward and requires obedience. Vulnerable and exposed, Moses decides that the best course of action is to plead with God, reminding God of all the promises he has already made. And then Moses begs for the glory of the Lord’s presence to accompany the Children of God so they will be protected. And God says, “OK,” but with serious hesitance and reservation. The glory of the Lord will shine, but Moses will not get to see it directly. God’s power is much too great for one so weak. Instead, when the dazzling light of the Lord’s presence passes by, the Lord promises to put Moses in an opening in the rock and cover him with the Lord’s own hand. And that’s exactly what God does. And Moses is “saved” between a rock and a hard place!

For me, this is a story of hope! I find hope in this ancient story of God’s goodness, especially when I find myself “between a rock and a hard place.”

Perhaps I ought to look more at God’s glory INDIRECTLY, protected by God, hidden in the cleft of a rock. From that vantage point I should be able to know that there is no way I can ever repay what God has done for me. And neither can you. But it is enough: it is enough glory to send me out into the week ahead, as a more committed human being than I was before I had a glimpse of that glory.

The compassionate, demanding Father knew what he was doing with Moses, and he knows what he is doing with me and with you, even when we find ourselves “between a rock and a hard place.” In God’s love we are never abandoned, only surrounded by a marvelous presence that calms a confused mind and sends us onward to be better reflections of his glory. God shines (even from the back side) into my darkest places, illuminating and cleansing me.

There are worse places to be in life than “between a rock and hard place.” We, all of us, live every day right in the “thick of things” where we often find ourselves covered by
God's hand, but we see enough to venture out in faith, even when all the red lights flicker on the dashboard of the car.

Let us pray.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee. Amen.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURES

EXODUS 33:12-23
The first lesson is an extended petition of Moses to God so that God would accompany the people of Israel on their wilderness travels.

PSALM 99
Psalm 99 is a song of praise that celebrates the power of God.

THESSALONIANS 1:1-10
Our second lesson is probably the earliest preserved Pauline letter, and, as such, it is likely the earliest preserved piece of Christian literature.

MATTHEW 22:15-22
In the gospel lesson we learn about seeking the divine advantage in cutting deals here on earth.

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Proper 25
Date: 24 October 1999
Title: “The Will of God In a Nutshell”
Text: Matthew 22:34-46

Job descriptions are usually very brief. Often, when people describe something or someone of importance, they count their words and make their point as quickly as possible. Sometimes, when people ask a question, all they want is an answer—a brief answer.

I hate to admit this to you, but so many times in the ministry I have experienced the lengthiest answer to a simple question. Ministry often deals with the opposite of brevity. While attending seminary and studying homiletics, one of my favorite definitions of a sermon was “two seconds of theology crammed into twenty minutes.”

On the contrary, in the business world, I have often asked for the Reader’s Digest version of the facts, or I have asked someone to please boil it down to what I need to know. I just want to know the facts. Stories are fine sometimes, but not right now. Just the facts, thank you! "Just tell me what I need to know!" That seems to be our modern compromise
between, on the one hand, "I want to know everything about everything", and "Don't tell me, I don't want to know."

What do we need to know? What is essential?

As a high school student, I learned about Cliff’s Notes. Thank the Lord I did, or I would never have been able to pass college English literature courses. The reading lists were impossible. No one could read that much in one semester and have time for anything else. Did I actually read all of the Canterbury Tales, all those Shakespeare plays, and Don Quixote? Well, yes, but only sort of, thanks to Cliff’s Notes. (In this regard, my son’s generation has an even greater advantage over mine, for he can usually just go to see the movie.) You can scoff at me, but I know that there are others who have taken shortcuts in order to accomplish some task. I am certain that there are others here this morning who, for whatever reason, tried to save some work and time and cut some corners, taking the easy way out. Face it. Even if you have never used Cliff’s Notes, don’t we all take shortcuts from time to time? I guess that is why I am not so surprised to hear Jesus say that it is okay to use Cliff’s Notes, so to speak, when it comes to summarizing God’s commandments.

In today’s lesson, we note Jesus' ability to think on his feet and handle those pesky Sadducees. A lawyer decides to take a shot at this popular young teacher he has heard so much about: “Which commandment is first,” he asks? Well, if I'd been in Jesus' position, knowing I was talking to a lawyer, I think I would have asked for a little clarification before answering, which is a lawyer’s tactic. “What do you mean by FIRST? First in order? First in importance? What do you mean by ALL? There are over 600 commandments! Do you really mean ALL or just the really important ones?”

But, Jesus knows better. He doesn't argue or quibble or cross-examine; he simply answers the lawyer’s stupid question. And, rather than answer in his own words, he turns to that source of authority that he, and the lawyer, and everyone listening recognizes and acknowledges, because Jesus quotes scripture, partly from Deuteronomy and, on top of that, partly from Leviticus. Then he slips in an extra commandment, giving the lawyer two answers when he asked for only one: “The first is this, ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this; ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” And then to further make his point, Jesus adds, “On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

In other words, by doing these two, you have done everything that really matters; by doing these two, the rest will take care of themselves. By doing these two things, you have written your job description as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Everything else--all our acts of piety, all our religious devotion, all of our "super-Christian" spiritual calisthenics--is like the icing on the cake. It is all extra! And besides, without the two BIG ONES, none of that other stuff means anything anyway!
This was radical stuff in Jesus’ day, and it is equally radical stuff today. After all, the basics have revolutionized the entire world. You know how miniaturization has revolutionized the electronics industry. In computer design, what used to take a room full of vacuum tubes can now be put on a single computer chip. The ability to perform complex mathematic calculations now fits in the palm of your hand or in your shirt pocket. (How I painfully recall studying land surveying as a civil engineering student in the early 1960s, and all we had for our complex calculations were huge, hand-cranked calculators.)

That is what Jesus did to the will of God. He took volumes and volumes of law and commentary and put it in a few simple words that anyone and everyone can understand. He put the will of the Almighty God of the universe in a nutshell, as it were, so that you and I can carry it around and look at it any time.

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Proper 26
Date: 31 October 1993
Text: Matthew 23:1-12
Title: “Halloween and the Christian"

Recently, I have been reading about so-called Evangelicals and other Fundamentalists waging a crusade against Halloween. Perhaps there is some merit in their efforts, because, as the news media have reported this week, Americans will be spending over $3 billion dollars this year on Halloween stuff. Halloween is now a major marketing target in the commercial world and has literally consumed the harvest and Thanksgiving season. The commercial world goes right from Halloween to Christmas.

I, personally, would rather see the three billion dollars go to food for the hungry and shelter for the homeless, but is all the attention given to Halloween by some Fundamentalists--as if Halloween somehow embodies all that is wrong with our culture, our schools, our children--really sensible? We hear a great deal from the lunatic fringe about creeping secular humanism, and how it has found its holiday home in Halloween, which supposedly celebrates the existence of witches, goblins, devils, vampires and ghosts.

Not wanting to promote the presence of evil, some genuinely frightened Christian parents are actually pulling their children out of public schools, with Halloween as their primary reason. Instead of fearing drugs or violence or a generally poor education for their children, these parents cite the prevalence of Halloween parties and spooky stories as evidence that while Christianity is expressly excluded from the classroom, Satanism is actively welcomed.

The truth is hardly that dramatic. In fact, the truth is that Christianity itself "took over" Halloween. 1600 hundred years ago, the Druids called it the “festival of Samhain.”
That’s right; Halloween is a Christian take-over, just like Christmas. The Celts celebrated the beginning of their New Year on November 1, by offering a variety of bonfires, animal and vegetable sacrifices, and well-wishing prayers to those who had died throughout the previous year. They believed that the souls of their departed friends and family members spent New Year's Eve being judged as to what form they should take for the next year. Good souls entered other human bodies at birth, they believed; bad souls entered animal bodies. On November 1, New Year's Day, the souls traveled to their new abodes.

Christian missionaries quickly took over this pagan celebration, transforming it into "All Saints' Day" or "All Hallows' Day" (i.e. a holy day, not a damned day), a holy day to commemorate the lives of all the saints of the church who have no special calendar day of their own, and to recognize the individual Christians within every congregation who have joined the Church Eternal in the last year.

The Celtic celebration, its meaning and symbols newly enriched by layers of Christian theology, simply shifted the time of the soul’s passage. The events that used to transpire on New Year's Day (November 1) now occurred on New Year's/All Hallows' Eve, October 31. All of Halloween's truly strange traditions--disguising ourselves in costumes, welcoming strangers at our doors with "treats," keeping special jack-o'-lantern vigil lights--stem from this ancient need for humans both to recognize and greet the certainty of death, and yet, at the same time, find a way to somehow keep its powers at bay. Indeed the "underground" nature that the Christian presence necessarily imposed on the old Celtic celebration undoubtedly heightened its power and its appeal.

How? I will show you.

There is in psychology "the rule of paradoxical effect." The rule of paradoxical effect means that if any point is stressed strongly enough, those listening or reading will develop an opposite attitude. For example, if I tell you that whatever happens during the next ten minutes, you are not to think about the candles that are burning on the altar, what will be the one thing that will haunt your mind for the next ten minutes? Or in its classic formulation, tell a child who is eating peas not to dare stick a pea in his nose when you leave the room.

I submit that the rule of paradoxical effect is exactly what those who now rail and flail against the "evilness" of Halloween may expect to see enacted. In fact, one might say the conservative crusade against Halloween is exactly what the Devil wants. Just as the early church failed to stamp out Samhain among pagan Celts 1600 years ago, this new attack on Halloween by so-called Christians can only succeed in making All Hallows' Eve all the more "devilish." By calling for its ban, one makes it stronger.

We see this problem in today’s gospel lesson. The Pharisees were also out to impose their version of what pious people should believe and how they should behave. Jesus saw right through their prayerful posturing and fringed fakery, recognizing the Pharisees' demand that everyone should behave as they, the Pharisees, deemed fit, as both hypocrisy and a
dangerous invitation for the seeds of “paradoxical effect” to take root and flourish. Jesus urged his listeners to demonstrate their distinctiveness, their faithfulness, not through pretend-piety but through attitudes of true humility, acceptance and equality. Why can’t Christians understand this? The Church is not in the morals business; the Church is in the forgiveness business.

One specific suggestion published by some groups battling the perceived satanic influence in Halloween, calls for parents to band together, march into their child's public school a few days before Halloween, and dramatically tear down all the construction paper witches, ghosts and goblins adorning the halls and walls. Jack-o’-lanterns are to be smashed, orange and black streamers pulled down, and all of it is to be ceremoniously dumped in the principal's office with the declaration that the religion of Satanism has no place in a public school curriculum. Of course, such behavior by adults would be unlawful, and hopefully if people did such a thing they would be arrested and fined.

How could any adult justify such behavior in front of children?

Instead of attacking cardboard cut-outs of ghosts and goblins, Christians should be concerned with the real horrors of life, the tangible specters of death that haunt so many children in the light of every day, not just in the darkness of All Hallows' Eve. It seems to me that adults who could act that way would also most certainly qualify for getting their windows soaped, and their lawns trashed, and their cars egged, or something worse, come Halloween night.

Halloween is, basically, about mortality.

Banning Halloween cannot banish death. But, Christians can face the truth of Halloween night with the knowledge that death is NOT the end. The real power of death, straightforwardly acknowledged on All Hallows' Eve, is shown to be truly broken by the celebration of All Saints' Day.

Death does not plunge the Christian into separation and darkness. It ushers believers into the greater communion of the Church Eternal. In the face of all the specters of death conjured up on Halloween night by human fear and guilt, Christians should rejoice in their freedom to say "Happy Halloween!" That has always been my greeting to children on Halloween, and that is what Mary and I taught Allen to say as a child when people greeted him at their front doors.

Happy Halloween! As members of Christ's eternal body, we need not fear any of the creatures of darkness that the human mind has created to help it comprehend mortality. We are Christians, and we do not need to do that.

Next Sunday, as it follows All Saints Day, we will remember all those who have gone before us in the faith, and the true meaning of All Saints Day will once again triumph over All Hallows Eve. Perhaps one more tradition from the ancient Celtic Festival of Samhain will illustrate how.
According to legend, as each family came to the communal bonfire on the Eve of Samhain, they brought with them the final coal from each of their own hearths. Combining these coals they would start a huge, warming watch fire. (In many parts of the world this is still done on New Years Eve.) At the conclusion of the night, after spending the evening telling stories about the ones who had passed away during the previous year, the participants would allow the bonfire to die down.

Finally, all that would be left was a small heap of glowing coals. Each family would gather one of these embers and carefully nurture its warmth until they once again reached their home hearth. There, that single coal from the community bonfire would be used to restart the family peat fire as the New Year slowly dawned. It was a new day, a new winter, but it would be warmed by the memories of loved ones long past.

So it is with us in modern times as All Saints' Day still triumphs over All Hallows' Eve.

BENEDICTION

And now, give us, O Lord, a steadfast heart, which no unworthy affection may drag downward; Give us an unconquered heart, which no tribulation can wear out; Give us an upright heart, which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside. --Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

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(Proper 27)  
All Saints Sunday  
Date: 07 November 1999  
Title: “The Special Children of God”  

Good morning saints! Does that cause you just a little discomfort--being called “saints?” But you really are saints. I know what you might be thinking, though. Perhaps at some point in your life, a parent or spouse or close friend might have remarked that you were no saint. I'm telling you now that you are. You are saints and so am I a saint. And now you know that!

The Apostle Paul used the term “saint” to refer to all baptized Christians. He wrote letters to the “saints” in Corinth, to the “saints” in Ephesus, and so on and so forth. Today he might write to us as the “saints” in Riceville or even Nashua.

Sometimes I read the letters of Paul with a smile. He writes to the "saints" in Corinth and then proceeds to lambaste them for their dreadful behavior. So, somehow, the term “saint” is not related to a person’s behavior.
The term "saint" comes from the Latin term "sanctus" which means holy. How can we use the term "Holy One" to refer to us? Well, it should not be too much of a stretch if we understand the lesson this morning from I. John about being very special children of God.

We can be called saints because of what God has done. Our holiness is not dependent on what we do, but it is dependent on what God has done. Let's get that clear from the start. Paul wrote to the saints in Ephesus, "For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it.” (Ephesians 2:8, 9)

But that's not all. Being saved through faith--and we are hearing a great deal about what these words mean right now, as Lutherans and Roman Catholics are making remarkable progress in a groundbreaking mutual understanding of the relationship between faith and salvation--Being saved through faith means, that not only does God forgive our sins and all the garbage that we carry around, but our lives are also credited with all the good things that Jesus did in his life.

I know that this may be difficult to understand. You have to use your imagination. When theologians get excited and start talking with all their theological terms, you've got to use your imaginations.

Can you imagine a photo album with photos of all the things that you ever did in your life, good and bad and everything in between? Can you imagine that? I am imagining now what my album might be like. If it were divided into three chapters, good, bad, and in between, I wonder which would be the thickest?

Cautiously I open the album, a little afraid of what I might find. To my surprise I find all the rotten stuff I've ever done is gone; it is removed. It is not there. In its place are photos--modern photos--of Jesus doing all his good works.

Why? How? Because we, as Christians, have the spirit of Christ dwelling in us. We are people who are being transformed, and becoming Christ-like through the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when we look in the album we don't see our old selves; we see our new selves.

That is why we can be called saints. Not because of what we have done, but because of what God has done in Christ. We may not be perfect, but we are on our way. Therefore, we are saints. That is my first conclusion this morning, but I have another.

I have always enjoyed the Peanuts comic strip. In one of my favorite episodes, Lucy tells Charlie Brown, "I have examined my life and found it to be without a flaw. Therefore, I’m going to hold a ceremony and present myself with a medal. I will then give a moving acceptance speech. After that I will greet myself in the receiving line." And she concludes sadly, "When you are a saint, you have to do everything yourself."
I suppose that is the idea that some of us may have of saints, but that is not the original biblical idea of saintliness. The original idea was about people like you and me.

The Christian saints are not perfect, they may be far from it, but they are pointed in the right direction. They are on the right road, and with God's help through Christ, they are seeking, and moving toward God's love, but they cannot do that alone.

We are called Saints because we are part of a community of saints. It is impossible to be a saint alone, all by ourselves. It takes the whole community of faith together. Clare Booth Luce had an interesting description of the church as a community of faith. She wrote, “A good stained glass window is made up of thousands of tiny pieces of colored glass held together with lead. The result is a figure. The portrait of a saint is only a fragment of a great and still uncompleted mosaic—the portrait of Jesus. Each saint is like a piece of colored glass in a total picture depicting Christ. The church, the communion of saints, is the body of Christ. The lead that holds the saints together is the Holy Spirit.”

We have come here together on this day to celebrate All Saints, all together; to find out more about who we are, where we are going, and who is going with us.

YES, THE SAINTS ARE MARCHIN’ IN!

Let’s go, SAINTS!

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Proper 28  
Date: 14 November 1999  
Title: “God’s Entrepreneurs”  
Text: Matthew 25:14-30

This parable often confuses people because of the way it is translated into English.

In common English, a "talent" is an inborn ability or gift for doing something. “Talent” has come to mean a special gift, something with which a person is born. The shape of the vocal chords and the resonating areas in a singer's head, might cause us to say that the person has a singing talent. But not all those who have these physical attributes grow up to become a Marilyn Horne or a Beverly Sills or a Jessye Norman or Luciano Pavarotti.

There have been thousands of talented composers throughout the centuries, but we know of only one J. S. Bach, one Mozart, one Beethoven, one Brahms, and one Mahler….  

The words of great writers have enchanted us from the times of King David and Homer all the way to Shakespeare and John Milton. Millions of words are written down every day and, despite the proliferation of television and the Internet, bookstores are groaning under the weight of new books, but only the most talented authors endure. And what a
long time it has been since Rembrandt and Van Gogh appeared on the scene, even though there are hundreds more art galleries and superb museums all over the world, than there were even a few decades ago.

All the people mentioned above had great talents. They were born with a gift that was rich and unique. But they all are honored, remembered and praised, because they lived up to their talents. They had the gift, but hard work and perseverance on their part caused the gift to become a giver. And here is the key to understanding our message this morning: the star characters in the story lived up to their talents. They did not just treasure them; they grew them; they lived up to them.

As in the first two examples in today’s gospel lesson--the servant who received the five talents and doubled them, and the servant who received the two talents and doubled those--the gifted people we admire do more than please themselves; they delight the rest of us. Their gift, when shared, becomes a gift to us also.

The gift of talent is a great trust. Some people are more talented than others, just as some people are more pleasing to the eye than others.

Throughout the ages, much has been expected of talented people. Those who are given the talents, i.e. the trust, have a great responsibility to use them for growth and for good. Others, because of laziness and indifference, do nothing with the gifts they were born with. They squander them or hide them, just as the third servant did.

Before we read too much into this parable, however, let us look at some facts that add a twist to our story.

In ancient times, a “talent” was a measure of weight. In this particular case, it is obviously the weight of gold or silver. Each talent was probably about a thousand dollars according to some historical research. It could mean about $15,000.00 in today’s money, or it could also mean the amount a person earned in 15 years. Today, let’s just call a talent a large sum of something.

On the surface, this parable is about a wealthy businessman and the business managers who look after his money while he is gone. So, this is a story about a big chunk of money, a big wad of cash. Let’s leave it at that for a few moments and not read anything else into it.

The wealthy businessman did not want his managers to just protect his investments in some kind of a trust fund until he came back. So let us play with this story a little for the sake of illustration.

The first manager had a Masters Degree in Business Administration from the Wharton School of Finance. He knew about finances and he was good with the stock markets. So the rich man gave that servant the largest amount, hoping that he could make more.
The second manager was the type who had done a little investing for his great aunt so that she would have enough income to stay in her own home as she aged gracefully. That manager knew a thing or two about Money Market accounts and Certificates of Deposit. So, he was given a smaller amount than the first manager.

The third manager didn't know much about money. He was the type who just had a savings account at a bank. So the businessman gave that guy the smallest amount.

When the businessman left town, two of the managers went about their business trying to put their boss’s money to work. When the boss returned, he gathered the three together and asked them what they had done with the talents he had given to them. The first one, the MBA from Wharton, replied, "Well, I took a big chance: I invested in high risk junk bonds and I made five more talents." And the boss said, "Well done good and faithful servant. You have done good with little; I will entrust you with much."

Then the boss asked the second servant, “What did you do with yours?”

He replied, "I put it in a C.D. at the Credit Union. It came due yesterday with a yield of two talents." And the boss said, "Well done good and faithful servant. You have done good with little; I will entrust you with much."

Then the boss turned to the third servant and said, "What about you?"

"Oh, sir, I knew you were a hard man and that if I lost your money you would be furious. I took care of your money just like I take care of my money. I would never have dared to buy junk bonds, and that Credit Union almost went bankrupt a few years ago. The last thing I wanted was for you to be mad at me, so I hid your talent in the ground so that I would not lose it through bad investments."

“You idiot! The least you could have done would have been to put it in a lousy savings account in a bank like the bank in which you have a savings account.”

“Take the talent away from him. Give it to the junk bond guy, and get this moron out of my sight.”

Is my version of the parable too harsh? Perhaps. But the overall point is made through the exaggeration. We have been given so much in this life. If we truly realize that all of it is a gift from God, we will want to give thanks for these gifts. But more than that, we will want, every day, to do something creative and constructive with the talents we have. If we don’t use them, we will lose them.

Someday God will ask us, what have you done with all that I have given you?

What are we going so say?
What is the most important gift you possess? Are you still wisely and effectively utilizing it? Have you lived up to it?

If not, dig it up, dust it off, and try again.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Lord God, we give you thanks for all your gifts to us: for daily food, for health, for each breath we take, for freedom to choose, for the gifts of your word, your power and your love. Our hearts are truly overwhelmed, O God, when we consider how you have entrusted so much to us. May we be worthy of that trust; may we be a people who are unafraid to live as fully and as richly as you want us to live.

Help us, we pray, as followers of your son, Jesus, to multiply all that you have given us, to risk spreading your word, to gamble by loving those whom others do not love, to take chances by doing good to those who have not done good to us. Help us to be faith-filled and to desire to increase your glory and your goodness in this world. Make us people who share in both word and deed that which you have given to us.

We pray, O God, for this family of faith, that, together, we may discover, develop, and use all our gifts, those of nature and those of grace, for the benefit of others.

We pray for those who are poor in body or in spirit, for those who are oppressed and heavy laden, for those who are sick or in despair, and for all those who need and desire our prayers. Minister, O God, by your Spirit, and by us, to all those for whom we have prayed, and help us walk faithfully in the path of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Proper 29
Date: 21 November 1999
Title: “Entering Gates With Thanksgiving”
Text: Psalm 100:4

The same thing has happened to me a number of times, but, as the years wear on, it seems to happen more and more, and that is a matter of concern. Please allow me to explain.

For example, not long ago, I entered the Mason City Downtown Mall. Three well-dressed women were following me as I approached the main entrance doorway. They were in the spirit for major retail therapy, I could tell: all talking at the same time; their high heels clicking away on the concrete; fluttery garments fluttering, hair glued into position even for the windiest Iowa afternoon.

I arrived at the entrance first, so I instinctively reached for the door, opened it, and held it for the three women. They never stopped talking. Somehow, they managed to enter the
doorway one at a time instead of all at once. Their bird chirping echoed in the entrance hall. On they went through the second set of doors, because, thank God, one of them was able to open a door all by herself. The second door closed before I got to it, however, because I had paused at the first door, waiting for one of them to say “thank you,” but I waited in vain.

About ten years ago, I recall reading an article on manners in the new politically correct, non-gender-specific age. The article claimed a new, polite procedure for opening doors: the first person arriving at a doorway, whether male or female, should open the door for the person or persons following him or her. Truthfully, I thought that was a great improvement over the situation at the time. No one at that time seemed to be opening doors for anyone beside themselves.

Another example of our thankless society might be from this past Halloween. There were plenty of trick-or-treaters saying, “Trick or Treat.” I even heard a few children say, “Happy Halloween.” But there were very few thank-you’s, except from the young children who were prodded to by their parents who yelled, “What do you say?” More than two hundred candy bars later, I could still count the number of thank-you’s on one hand.

I would also like to offer an example of what I would call a meaningless thank-you. Do any of you watch the Today Show? After the typical interview or discussion, the interviewer usually says “thank you.” The guest usually replies with “thank you.” Thus, the dialogue at the end of nearly every interview is, “thank you,” “thank you.” Whatever happened to “you’re welcome?” When did you last hear anyone reply to “thank you” with “you’re welcome?”

Do things like that bother you? Does a lack of manners bother you? Does a total lack of gratitude bother you? When people forget to practice good manners and thoughtfulness, does it make your life a little less joyful? When people fail to express gratitude, does something seem to be very wrong with the world?

Here, in the United States of America, we have a national holiday dedicated to the art of saying “thank you.” It, Thanksgiving, is not quite as important to the commercial world these days as Halloween or Christmas or Valentine’s Day or Easter or Mothers’ Day, but it is still on the calendar. And it has not yet been moved to a Monday, like most national holidays. It is still where it has been for quite some time: the last Thursday in November. Many nations commemorate wars, and those who fought in them. Many commemorate national heroes. Very few pause to say “thank you” to God the Giver, the Sustainer, the Redeemer of life.

This week, we in this nation will pause to do just that. We remember, of course, the time in 1621 when a strong, courageous group of people prepared a dinner to which they invited everyone to honor and acknowledge God’s generosity, grace and mercy. It was a “thank you” dinner for survival. It was celebrated in the midst of hardship and adversity, in a strange and foreign land, and yet, the celebrants acknowledged that God had blessed
them. In this act and by their invitation to people not related to them in any way, they, the Pilgrims, remembered their manners. They practiced thoughtfulness. They exhibited gratitude to a generous and loving God. They set an example, which we try to follow today.

So it is that we gather here today to give thanks to God, and then, in the week ahead, on Thursday, in our homes or in the homes of relatives or friends, we feast, and feast abundantly.

That may be the ritual, but that is not the purpose of Thanksgiving. The purpose is to remind those of us who participate that we are not the authors of our lives. Sometimes we may be almost in control, but most of the time we are not.

Two weeks ago or so, I read about a shopper at the local shopping mall who, on a break from her office job, felt the need for an afternoon coffee break. She bought herself a little bag of gourmet cookies and put them in her shopping bag. She then got in line for coffee, found a place to sit at one of the crowded tables, and then, taking the lid off her coffee and taking out a magazine, began to sip her coffee and read. Across the table from her, a man sat reading a newspaper.

After a minute or two she reached out and took a cookie from the bag. As she did, the man seated across the table reached out and took one too. This put her off, but she did not say anything. A few moments later she took another cookie. Once again the man did so too. She was very annoyed, but she still did not say anything even though she wanted to.

After having a few more sips of coffee she once again reached for a cookie. So did the man. She was now really upset by this, because only one cookie was left. Apparently the man also realized that only one cookie was left. Before she could say anything, he took it, broke it in half, offered half to her, and proceeded to eat the other half himself. Then he smiled at her and, putting his newspaper under his arm, rose and walked off.

She was irate. Her coffee break was totally ruined. She went over and over in her mind how she was going to tell her co-workers about this offence. She folded her magazine, opened her huge shopping bag, and, as she put her magazine into the bag, saw her own unopened bag of cookies.

I realize that my two main illustrations in this sermon may seem to be sexist. I also know that men do the same kinds of things. But that is not my point. My point, at this point, and in conclusion, should be obvious: There is a basic need in every individual to be generous, to be grateful, and to be thankful. If we do not work on meeting those basic needs, then we will never know what it means to be mannerly, or polite, or politically correct.
SERMONS FOR YEAR B

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Date: 28 November 1999  
Meditation: “The Three Words of Advent”

WAIT. WATCH. WAKE. Three words of Advent! How do we use them?

I am not quite certain of how many times this has happened lately, but after dinner, Mary and I often have a conversation that goes something like this: “Oh, I’m so tired; I need to go to bed.”

Reply: “I do, too.”

“Well, we need to wait long enough to clean up the kitchen and put the dishes away.”

“O.k., but that’s as long as I can wait.”

“But one of us needs to watch the news – to check the weather.”

“O.K, but after the weather, I’m history.”

“And one of us needs to walk the dog.”

Then, one of us will stay to watch the news, while the other walks the dog and then tries to get ready for bed before the TV person can do so, only to return to the TV room to find the TV volunteer asleep in front of the TV.

“Hey, Hey, Hey. Wake up, and go to bed.”

WAIT. WATCH. WAKE. The three words of Advent! They are such human words. We use them so often.

WAIT A MINUTE.

WATCH OUT.

WAKE UP.

As it has been said, life is what happens while we are making other plans, so wait a minute, will you; watch out; wake up.

Life has its ways of catching us off guard. Most of us have had moments that have thrown us off balance. In order not to be thrown by these events, Jesus describes the life
we need to live now: a life shaped by the sharp eye of vigilance, standing guard at life's doorways, letting in the good, and barring the door to what is evil and corrupting to our faith. Our faith needs to be nurtured by daily care and attentiveness that will sustain us when life plays one of its tricks on us.

The shows we are seeing on television in these weeks, leading up to January 1, would have us think that the new millennium will play tricks on us; that it means danger and disaster, as the clocks in antiquated computer systems will cease to function. So what are we to do, some have asked in alarm?

Well, I say, if the clock is broken, fix it. We have skilled persons who have a knack for electronics and computer programming. I doubt that it would take them very long to fix the broken clock if the new millennium does play tricks on us. It may sound trite, but I don't expect it will be the end of the world if some dim-witted computer operator doesn't reset his or her clock.

Several weeks ago I took my old laptop computer to a brilliant young man who just started a new computer service center. I have always liked that computer, but it is now ten years old, and the memory battery had died. I asked the young man to please advise me as to what I might do to up-date the computer. I had updated it several times before. Other computer "experts" had advised me years ago to buy a new computer; I did, but I kept my friend. I really like that computer. What else could I do with my good old friend, I asked the young man?

"Oh, we can do a lot of neat stuff," he replied. "And it won't cost very much."

He did a few tests, found a replacement battery, helped me clean up my hard drive, and declared my modem just fine. He also pointed out that my calendar was just fine up until 2099. That's right, the manufacturers of that lap-top computer of ten years ago, made sure that it would function just fine for more than a hundred years, and work flawlessly right through the turn of the century.

So what is all the alarmist talk about the end of the century and the beginning of a new millennium? The date is so arbitrary. God had nothing to do with it, and, obviously, a great many human beings had nothing to do with it either. Both they and God are more interested in today than in yesterday.

So, wait, and watch, and wake up! I am not certain about the computer industry, but I do believe that God has always been more interested in what we may become than in what we have been.

Is God involved in the computer business? I think not.

Is God involved in the future business? I believe so! And, perhaps that is why God is also in the forgiveness business, instead of the lottery business.
PASTORAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we have been enriched in every way through the love so clearly revealed by your son, Jesus.

As we wait once more to celebrate the birth of your son, we pray for those who have lost any sense of wonder because of the stress of just living from day to day; for those who are worn out from the effort of making ends meet.

We pray for families where relationships have broken down and where children feel unloved and unwelcome; where family members are forced out of their homes because of violence and abuse.

We pray for all people who are made to feel unwelcome because of their race, their color, or their religion. We pray for attitudes that truly reflect Jesus’ commandment to love one another.

We pray for people for whom this Advent season points to a heightened sense of failure rather than any promise of fulfillment; for people who identify this season with lost dreams; for people who know only loneliness and recycled memories.

Hear our Advent prayers, we pray, for you are our God, the God of everything new and exciting. Amen.

*  *

Advent 2  
Date: 05 December 1999  
Homily/Meditation  

In Mark’s gospel, the baptism of Jesus announces the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. According to Mark, this is where it all began. The birthday story is not important to Mark, nor is anything that preceded this baptism event.

Had Jesus met his cousin, John, before this event? We do not know. We do know that Jesus was very impressed with his cousin’s ministry. And we know that whatever happened that day of their meeting by the Jordan River, it was the only external, historically verifiable marker of a pivotal “turning around” in Jesus’ life.

This is the story of Jesus’ conversion. On this day, Jesus was born again!

What do we know about John? We know that he was probably NOT the kind of person we would have on our Christmas party guest list. His cloths, his looks—oh my—can you imagine him washing down his locusts and wild honey with Christmas party eggnog? John the Baptizer was not described as someone who would be the life of a party!
John preached about repentance. He called for the Judeans of his day to repent, and then
he immersed them in water as a sign of a new inward purity and repentance that would
deliver them from the fires of hell. He was an immensely popular preacher whose career
was widely known to the end of the first century, as the gospels were being written. The
Mandeans, a sect who survive to this day near Baghdad, claim John the Baptizer as their
founder.

John’s heavy message of repentance affected Jesus in a profound way, but we find that
the early Christians, such as Mark, found John’s authentic preaching very awkward, and
they, as we learn from Mark, quickly replaced John’s fire and brimstone with the promise
of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus, for Christians, John’s fate was sealed as the
forerunner of Jesus.

The drama is intense here as Mark reports the strength of the response to John, while
John has so little to say beyond pointing to Jesus. In the public mind, in his day, John was
very likely a much “bigger” presence than Jesus. We know from the writings of Josephus,
the Jewish historian of the first century, that Herod Antipas feared John more than
anyone in the kingdom at that time. John was the one person who could instigate a
revolution, and, as a consequence, Herod had John executed.

So, did John only point the way to Jesus, as Mark implies? Or can we learn more here
about the ministry of Jesus from his encounter with John?

As we learn about John, there is a lot of good news to share already. If we could just
catch up to where John can take us, and be converted, and be forgiven, and be included in
such a fellowship, then we--you and I--will be on the way to becoming good news for the
world in which we live.

If we read the gospel of Mark carefully, we realize that Mark does not “hog” all the good
news for Jesus in today’s gospel lesson. The good news of Jesus presupposes the good
news of John. That, and perhaps that alone, is why we still have water baptism. But John,
the water Baptizer, points to another baptism—the baptism of the Holy Spirit—the great
good news to be initiated through Jesus.

This Advent, like the thousands who 2,000 years ago flocked to the River Jordan, let us
confess our sins and await the coming of new hope for our lives, as Jesus did. Let us give
thanks to God for our baptism, which binds us together in a community of faith, as we
wait with anticipation and joy for the coming of the one who baptizes us with the Holy
Spirit. Amen.

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Advent 3
Date: 12 December 1999
Theological Reflections on an incomplete sermon.
This week we again hear about John the Baptist. The first three verses of the gospel of John in the prologue, celebrate Jesus as the Word of God, or the Logos of God, or the Wisdom of God.

“Logos” comes from the same root as our English word, logic. Therefore, Jesus is portrayed as the “real wisdom” of God that makes sense of this world. Jesus is the world’s logic, the world’s logos. In Jesus we encounter that logic in flesh and blood. Jesus is God’s direct and personal communication, God’s representative, and as such he is the one who brings life and light into the world.

Recall, if you will, how newspaper cartoon artists often place a picture of a light bulb above a character who is thinking and who has an idea. In today’s gospel lesson, John draws just such a picture; only the light bulb over Jesus’ head represents the wisdom, the logic of God.

(What a great message this is as we come to the beginning of a new century and a new millennium!)

We also find someone carrying a flashlight in John’s gospel--John the Baptist, whom I like to call John the Baptizer. Jesus was sent by God, but so was John the Baptist. John the Baptist is, according to John the author, “a man sent from God.”

It becomes clear when we look at the lectionary passage as a whole that John the Baptist was important to the writer, but only as a flashlight that points the way to the one with the light bulb over his head. “I am not the Christ,” states John the Baptist. Some of John’s followers evidently saw in him a savior. Therefore, John the author plays down John the Baptist’s role. As we found in Mark’s gospel last week, John the Baptist, as a person sent by God, baptized with water, but the one who would follow him would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the gospel writer portrays John the Baptist as not too significant, and yet as not too insignificant. His chief role is to bear testimony to Jesus, to bear witness to Jesus, to focus on Jesus, and to light the way to Jesus. The focus is on Jesus.

Nevertheless, it is striking that so much of what is said about Jesus is also said about John in the fourth gospel. Both are sent from God. The chief role of both is to bear witness. Later, John the Baptist will also be described as a bringer and bearer of light (5:35). In that sense both John and Jesus are pointing beyond themselves to someone else. There is no competition here between the two people sent by God. They both serve, essentially, a single function—pointing the way—lighting the way, but one carries a flashlight as he makes his way to the other with the light bulb over his head.

John, the author, makes things simple for his readers. Simplification is a characteristic of the fourth gospel. Even the traditional sayings and stories of Jesus are made to serve this
single theme. Jesus is the one with the light bulb above his head, representing life and light and truth. This is how John “does” theology.

Jesus does not compete with John the Baptist. Jesus also does not compete with God. Both Jesus and John point the way to God. Ultimately, God is the central focus. This is reflected in the fact that the author uses the same language when he writes about Jesus as when he writes about John—being sent, bearing a witness, etc. Both characters are enveloped in light and life and water and bread. Both are involved in the so-called spirituality of the fourth gospel—the spirituality that makes sense out of life.

As we prepare our hearts and minds for the celebration of Christmas, let us focus on that spirituality: let us focus on that center; let us look where John the Baptist is looking; let us look to Jesus, the light of the world, the world’s logos, the logos of God, the “real wisdom” of God that makes sense of this world.

The light is coming into our world, into our congregation, into our homes, and into our hearts this Christmas season. Let us welcome the Light, and, like John the Baptist, let us also be faithful witnesses.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11

In a passage probably written after the people of Israel returned from Exile to a devastated land, the prophet foretells the total salvation of God’s people. Jesus used the opening verses as his text when he preached the good news in the synagogue at Nazareth.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Paul is drawing toward the conclusion of his letter. He has just exhorted the Thessalonian Christians regarding personal conduct and their relations within the community. Now he turns to spiritual matters.

John 1:6-8,19-28

John tells us about the Word, i.e. what God says and accomplishes in creation. Now the Word enters creation, and a prophet appears to bear witness to this cosmic event in our midst.

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Advent 4
Date: 19 December 1999
Title: “The Surprising Nature of God’s Grace.”
About fifteen years ago, while I was teaching in an Illinois college and serving a church in Dubuque as a minister of music, I also served as a substitute preacher in nearby churches.

Several times I preached at a Presbyterian church that was in the process of interviewing candidates, and, as a result, the congregation asked me if I would consider being a candidate.

I had no immediate intentions of changing denominations, although I had attended two Presbyterian seminaries and did not feel uncomfortable with the idea, should an interesting position become available. So, I said yes. My personal prayers at the time were something like, “God, I’m not sure about this, but if it is your will, then, I’ll give it a try.”

(It is not unheard of for a Presbyterian pastor to serve a United Church of Christ congregation, but it is very unusual for a UCC pastor to serve a Presbyterian congregation, unless the call is to a charge that includes one church of each denomination.)

In order for me to begin the interview process, I first needed to meet with the Presbytery to which that particular congregation belonged (A Presbytery is like one of our Associations.).

One member of the Presbytery was a seminary associate professor who asked me a question I was not immediately ready to answer in front of a group of people who were mostly laypeople. The question was something like this: “Do you accept the virgin birth of Jesus on the basis of biblical authority?”

I struggled to answer the question in terms that would be understood by everyone present. At first, I simply answered, “Yes,” but that wasn’t good enough for the associate professor. She asked me to explain.

I was trapped, and I knew it.

“First of all, I noted, Christians of the Reformed tradition have no so-called doctrine of the virgin birth, only the biblical accounts in Luke and Matthew, and the historical creeds of the Church, namely the Nicene Creed.”

At that point, the clergy braced themselves, but the laity immediately put their eyelids into the sermon position.

“Paul,” I continued, “the first Christian writer and theologian, who never failed to include everything he deemed important to the faith in his writings, never wrote about the virgin birth. None of the preachers in the Book of Acts mentioned it. Two of the four gospels mention nothing about it. Therefore, one should assume that it is not something upon
which one’s faith is dependent. Therefore, accepting the virgin birth is a matter of personal choice. I would rather concentrate on the faith and the ministry of Jesus.”

My answer seemed to satisfy both the clergy and lay members of the Presbytery, but not the female associate professor, who continued on and on with her irritating questions, which cast a very negative mood over what otherwise might have been a very pleasant interview.

Well—I am still in the UCC. Soon after that interview, however, I learned that the associate professor had been refused tenure and was forced to leave her position.

Do I accept the story of the virgin birth? Well—why not!

After all, what matters most in life: what happens to us, or how we respond to what happens to us?

Do I understand the story of the virgin birth? No. There is a great deal about the great grace of God that I do not understand. Do I believe in the surprising nature of the grace of God? Yes! Do I understand it? No! Sometimes, perhaps! Always? No!

Accepting something and understanding something are two different conditions, both of which are not necessarily required for belief.

I have very little understanding about the workings of the cosmos and the overwhelming complexity of the universe, but I believe it is there and I believe that all of it is the work of the Creator God, and I believe these things not only on the basis of biblical authority, but also on the basis of acquired knowledge from various disciplines and on personal experience.

If we read and digest the lessons from Luke for today, then, I think, one must conclude that even Mary, the mother of Jesus, faced this problem. She believed in the great grace of God. She did not disbelieve what was happening to her; she simply did not understand. Her reply to God was something like, “I’m not sure about this, but I’ll give it a try.” From this point on, the reader is required to decide how to accept this story, and this decision is a personal decision, because belief is not an issue here, only acceptance based upon knowledge and experience.

Some time ago, I read a story that was written by a minister who had a daughter in seventh grade. She was a very bright and sensitive and relatively well-informed girl, but, even as a pastor’s child, she did not understand everything she heard in church.

One day at her Junior High School, in the cafeteria, one of her curious female friends asked her, “Are you a virgin?”

Well, the pastor’s daughter was really on the spot, because she really did not know what a virgin was. She did some quick thinking that went something like this: The only virgin
she had heard about was Mary, the mother of Jesus, and everyone knows that Mary had a baby. Therefore, a virgin must be a woman who has had a baby.

Thus, armed with that conclusion, the seventh grader announced loudly to her friend in the cafeteria, “No! I am not a virgin.”

All her friends at the table heard her and were shocked. The boy sitting next to her quickly whispered into her ear, “You don’t know what you are talking about.”

This morning we heard about another young woman, from long ago, who did not understand what was going on, and yet she believed in the great grace of God.

There is so much in our lives that we do not understand. Our lives, our daily situations, the condition of the world in which we live, all may seem impossible. We may say to ourselves, “How can God bring a blessing out of this mess?”

As we prepare our hearts and minds for the celebration of Christ’s birth, and we remember God’s great gift of hope, wrapped in swaddling clothes and tied with a bow of impossibility, let us tenderly and believingly unwrap this gift to discover once again, that, with God, nothing is impossible. Then, we can accept the Christmas story with all its poetry, and let it come into our hearts and bless us.

Our beliefs, as people of faith, are not dependent upon our understanding any more than Mary’s were, but God’s presence in our lives is just as much a blessing in our lives as in Mary’s life. As with Mary, God invites us to see the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, even in the most impossible and in the most unlikely situations we encounter. And in this very down to earth way of believing, we ourselves are strengthened, and we can sing with Mary, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”

Amen.

PRAYER

Loving God, our spirits rejoice in all your gracious acts towards us, most of all the event we so look forward to this coming week--the wonderful and precious gift of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks for the willingness of Mary to believe that the impossible could and would happen. Help us to have a faith like hers. Open our hearts and minds to believe that your promises can come to surprising fulfillment. Show us how we can best serve you with mercy and in humility, empowering people to live lives of dignity and worth.

As we look at our television screens and read accounts of people throughout the world who are being made powerless because of the greed and violence of others, remind us of the great possibility of prayer to effect changes for good. Help us to lift up the lowly, to
fill those who are hungry, and to drive away those who profit from the weakness and ignorance of others. Be with all those this season who feel that life holds no hope, and help them and each of us truly to believe, O God, that with you, nothing is impossible. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Christmas 1
Date: 26 December 1999
Meditation

How can we make Christmas and the spirit of Christmas last?

Perhaps all we need to do is continue to read the story. We do that every week.

Today, Mary and Joseph bring the boy Jesus to the temple for consecration to God, as prescribed by the traditions of their faith. When they do this, they make glad the heart of an old man, who had been promised by God that, before he died, he would see the Christ of the Lord. Simeon recognized Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise, declaring that his eyes had now seen God’s salvation, “A light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for [the] people of Israel.”

Mary and Joseph were bewildered at the reaction of Simeon, and their astonishment continued when an old prophetess in the temple also came forward and gave thanks for this child who would be the redemption of Jerusalem. Imagine their hearts and minds filled with such words as they made their way back to the little town of Nazareth—a nondescript place, where they led simple lives.

How do we keep the Christmas story alive?

We have our lives to live. We interrupt them for Christmas, and then, all too soon, Christmas is over, and we are right back where we were—right back in Nazareth, Nashua, or Riceville.

Mary and I and Allen have had a wonderful time since Allen returned from Italy last week. But, after the dishes were done yesterday, I broke the spell, by saying that I would have to finish my sermon for Sunday morning. Oh, yes, I had planned it, and outlined it, and prepared for the worship service, and published the bulletin early last week, all in preparation for the holiday, but not completely. The sermon was thought out, but not really done. Therefore, after the Christmas dinner, the real world, once again, crept back.

I asked myself, “How can I keep the Christmas spirit?” Then I read over the gospel lesson for today. “It’s simple,” I said to myself. “I will just keep reading the story.”
I am not a sports fan at all, but years ago I ran across a quote of Lou Holtz at the University of Arkansas, who was taking his team to play a bowl game in Arizona. The game was to be played on Christmas day. He was asked how he felt about playing a game on Christmas Day, rather than being with his family. The coach answered candidly, “I would rather be in [Arizona]. After all, once you have been to church, had Christmas dinner, and opened the presents, Christmas is the most boring day of the year.”

Is it possible to lose the spirit of Christmas that quickly? As a minister, I can honestly reply, “Yes, unless you keep reading the story.”

I will speak only for myself, but in this busy world in which I live, it is difficult enough to plan for Christmas. To actually do it, is another matter. And, to survive the doing, is a noble endeavor, indeed.

Do you hate taking down Christmas decorations? I do, but I still like putting them up. Our decorating ideas have, however, changed over the years. Years ago, we bought an artificial Christmas tree. Why? Well, probably because we had for decades tried to keep so-called Christmas trees alive, that were cut in Canada three years before, and spray-painted with green paint. We put aspirin in the water; we put sugar in the water; however, nothing could keep something alive that was already dead. Regardless of what we did, the trees that were already losing their needles continued to whither. Why? Because, they were cut off from their roots.

How do we keep the spirit of Christmas alive? How can we make Christmas, and the spirit of Christmas last?

Perhaps, all we need to do is continue to read the story. We do that every week. Today, Mary and Joseph bring the boy Jesus to the temple for consecration to God, as prescribed by the traditions of their faith. When they do this, they make glad the heart of an old man, who had been promised by God that, before he died, he would see the Christ of the Lord.

Simeon recognized Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise, declaring that his eyes had now seen God’s salvation, “A light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for [the] people of Israel.”

Mary and Joseph were bewildered at the reaction of Simeon, and their astonishment continued when an old prophetess in the temple also came forward and gave thanks for this child who would be the redemption of Jerusalem. Imagine their hearts and minds filled with such words as they made their way back to the little town of Nazareth—a nondescript place where they led simple lives.

How do we keep the Christmas story alive?

We have our lives to live. We interrupt them for Christmas, and then, all too soon, Christmas is over, and we are right back where we were—right back in Nazareth, Nashua, or Riceville.
And, now, of course, and obviously, I am repeating myself.

May God grant that we might dwell peacefully in the holy mystery of OUR lives, not needing to know the future so much as being willing to live each day fully and gracefully, through Christ who sets us free.

Amen.

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Christmas 2
Date: 27 December 1998
Title: “Responding To a Time-Shattering Event”

It is rather disconcerting, I think, that the first story about the Holy Family is about their flight to Egypt. There is no logic to explain the slaughter ordered by Herod. There is no comfort and joy in this story, only sorrow. There is a double sorrow, in learning that although one family's child escaped, others suffered loss. It is not enough comfort to plead that sorrow refines life, for sorrow, in itself and unredeemed, is not purification, but death. The only good news from today's gospel lesson is that God abides, and Christ abides: Christ was not slain. There is a heaven here and hereafter, which no Herod can destroy.

As we interpret today's lessons and use our imagination a bit, how do we identify with all the people involved in the Christmas story?

In his great sermon, titled "Christmas Day," the famous American preacher, Phillips Brooks, asked his hearers to identify with one of three groups of characters in the Christmas drama. The first group was those who were nearest to Jesus, i.e. his parents. We learn from them about the dignifying of humanity through the story of the incarnation. The second group was the company of wise men from the East, about whom we will hear more next week. They teach us about the true place of humanity in obedient subject-ship to the incarnate one. The third group was the shepherds, who heard the angels' song and went to Bethlehem to "see this strange thing." They remind us of those who are common, poor, needy, empty, wanting and needing a Savior. They go the manger and find all they wanted.

There are many other players in this drama whose responses to this time-shattering event are more negative than positive, more evil than good. King Herod heads the list of these. His desire to kill the child, followed by his edict that all male babies be destroyed, stands in stark contrast to the blessed story of angels and wise men, mother and father and child, shepherds and stable stock. The historical record of this weak king who thought he was strong, this short-sighted tyrant who thought he had a fool-proof plan, this man of history
who is remembered so badly, reminds us today that the light shines in the midst of darkness.

So soon the Savior became a refugee in a foreign land. The events that made the Holy Family refugees were the ordinary events of their time. Ordinary events can effectively do away with the Holy Child of Bethlehem. As Phillips Brooks wrote in his most famous work of all, however, the carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of his heaven.”

The mystery of the incarnation can be understood simply: "Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.”

Recently I received via the Internet a contemporary story about American Christian missionaries in the new Republic of Russia who offered assistance to an orphanage in Saint Petersburg. As Christmas approached last year, or the year before, the missionaries asked the orphans to draw pictures of the manger scene. All the scenes were about the same, with animals, shepherds, angels, and Joseph and Mary, and the baby lying in the manger. One very young boy, however, drew a picture with two babies in the manger. "Why did you draw two babies in the manger," asked one of the missionaries?

"Because," replied the boy, "I prayed to the baby Jesus to ask him if I could be born with him and live with him in a real family like his, and he said I could."

Let us pray.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in;
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel!

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

ISAIAH 63:7-9: The Old Testament lesson explores the implications of what it means when we confess that God is actually with us in this world. Isaiah states how God is able to suffer with us.

PSALM 148: Psalm 148 celebrates the reliability of God.

HEBREWS 2:10-18: The second lesson assures us that at the heart of Jesus’ birth, the saving grace of God is at work to deal with the human condition.
MATTHEW 2:13-23: In the gospel lesson the author tells us that Jesus brings God's will, as known through scripture, into the real world, to fulfillment, and moves God's will into the future for the salvation of all humankind.

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Epiphany 1
Date: 09 January 2000
Sermon for the 1st Sunday after Epiphany
Text: Genesis 1:1-5

My sermon text this morning, is from the Old Testament lesson: And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Genesis 1:5b)

Let us pray.

Lord, for tomorrow and its needs I do not pray;
Keep me, my God, from stain of sin just for today.
Help me to labor earnestly and duly pray;
Let me be kind in word and deed, Father God, today. Amen.

As I was reading a great deal of material just before the beginning of the new year, that might be useful for future sermons, I read the wonderful prayer I just offered, which was written in the last century. Also, close to or on New Year’s Eve, I read this interesting tidbit in what will be one of Charles Schultz’s last Peanuts cartoons: “Don't worry about the world coming to an end today. It's already tomorrow in Australia.”

Well, we are now nine days into the new millennium, and we all are still here. The Y2K glitches have been few and far between, and, one day at a time, we are assuring ourselves that the sky is not going to fall, at least not right away. So, “don’t worry, be happy.”

One of my favorite bumper stickers reads "One Day At A Time". While it is used by a variety of groups, did you know that it is the unofficial motto of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous)? As part of their Twelve Step Plan to recovery, alcoholics and others who suffer the ravages of many kinds of addictive behaviors and diseases are encouraged to live "one day at a time." The goal is to never lose sight of the fact that yesterday is history, tomorrow has not yet arrived, and all we have is today. If we are to be "overcomers," we must deal with overcoming our addictions, our temptations, our stress factors, and our emotional roller coaster--mood swings, our obsessive behaviors and depression--all of it--in the arena of today.

We can succeed—we can do that, but only with God's grace, and only one day at a time.
I think it is amusing, at least, that this little phrase, "one day at a time," while being so simple and understandable, is so difficult to live out. The truth for most of us is that we do not live "one day at a time." I know that I do not.

Rushing here and there, making lists of things to do, and lists of things undone, and lists of things yet to be considered, I can easily get discouraged. There is never enough time to do everything, and when there is time to do something, I am often so muddled in my thinking that very little gets done effectively.

I have discovered in my old age, that when I get that way, it is usually a good time to take a nap. That is a time for THINK NOT. That is a time to stop doing everything.

I am not a betting person, but I will bet you that right now some of us are…
…worrying about medical tests that we have to take sometime in the future.
…stewing over what we said to someone last week, because we may have been misunderstood, or, worse yet, we may have hurt someone’s feelings.
…sitting here…planning out the rest of today and hoping that the pastor has a shorter sermon than usual.
…anguishing over a broken relationship.
…dying to see a loved one who just celebrated a happy event.
…contemplating what it would take to get a better job.
…counting the days and hours until our college kids graduate.
…thinking about early retirement.
…praying that the worst doesn't happen, but knowing it may and then what….

It all adds up to stress and worry and frustration over things and events we can not control very well.

We do not do very well living "one day at a time." Poor Charlie Brown knows all about this. In one of Schultz’s last comic strips, Linus asks him, "Life is difficult, isn't it, Charlie Brown?" Charlie responds with, "Yes it is. But I've developed a new philosophy. I only dread one day at a time."

My dear friends, surely, "dreading one day at a time" is not a very glorious way to live. There has to be a better way. And there is.

Our Bible is a good guidebook, and its guidance begins with the very first words recorded in the book of Genesis.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, we are at the beginning of time.

This week, we are at the beginning of a new year, and the beginning of a new millennium, therefore our text takes its cue from the first words of Genesis, "In the beginning … God." And what did God do in the beginning? God created. Scripture says he created ex nihilo, "from out of nothing". His creating brings form out of the void. God
created order out of chaos, something new and exciting out of nothing: a world, light, and life out of chaos. And God did this creating, we are told, one day at a time.

One day at a time!

I am not certain about how long one of God’s days can be. The Bible says they can be very long indeed. But I also know how long my days can be.

Therefore, I rejoice to read that God took his time in the creating process. Scientists call it evolution, but it is the same thing as the creation process described in Genesis. God could have just zapped the cosmos into existence, perhaps, but, instead, God chose to take his time. God divided up his work and did each segment perfectly well, in its own time, and in its own order.

Now, if God can take his time and fine tune his creation, isn't there a lesson in this model for those of us who can't "take the time" to do things right?

I think there is, and it fairly leaps out at us across the printed first page of Genesis. Slow down! "Stop to smell the roses on the way to work!" Consider who you are and whose you are before stepping out into the "unknown."

Certainly there are moments that require our immediate attention, but I am not talking about them today. There are times that invite us to savor the present moment, but I am not talking about them today. Today I am talking about dividing up our time into livable moments.

How livable are your moments? How livable are mine? Well—it depends upon what we want to make of life.

God does not spend time making junk. God takes the time to put his best into creating, and so should we.

There is great power and great joy in the beauty of living one day at a time. And that is an Epiphany I want to carry with me all through these cold wintry days.

God created me and God created you in his good time. God loves me, and God loves you. And God walks with us through life one day at a time.

   Lord, for tomorrow and its needs I do not pray;  
   Keep me, my God, from stain of sin just for today.  
   Help me to labor earnestly and duly pray;  
   Let me be kind in word and deed, Father God, today. Amen.

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Epiphany 2
The story about the calling of Samuel, is a story about God's initiative.

We might better understand the setting for today's lesson if we first read the preceding chapter and the beautiful Song of Hannah in which Hannah celebrates the power of God to answer prayer and to initiate salvation. Hannah had been barren. She went to the temple and prayed for a child, and her prayer was answered in the birth of Samuel.

Therefore, we will better understand this story if we first note the interrelationships of the characters.

When has God taken the initiative in your life?

Surely, it is not difficult for us to confess that God has, from time to time, taken the initiative in our lives as we reflect on the good times, on the great moments, on the stupendous events in our lives, but what about the other 99.9% of our lives?

In the early morning hours, in the quiet inner sanctions of the temple, a boy named Samuel hears a voice. Samuel does not identify the call right away. He needs to have it repeated. He needs to have it interpreted.

I am certain that each of us has probably easily and heartily sung,

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Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult
Of our life's wild restless sea,
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth,
Saying "Christian, follow me."
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And yet, (Now, I am not a betting person—but….) I bet that there is not one of us here this morning who would not be scared spit-less if God loudly called us by name, or, if we just so happened to catch God doing something directly in our lives.

Then again, perhaps our culture has prepared us through the media for anything. A dramatic call from a voice in the sky might be from the announcer in a savings bank advertisement, or there might be a loud voice in the kitchen, when no one else is home, saying, "ALICE, WHY ARE YOU USING THAT DETERGENT?"

Do you remember the rain scene in the movie, "Oh God," with George Burns and John Denver? John Denver's character asked for some proof, that George, God, is really God. So, George, (God), says he will make it rain.

Big deal! Then, on a sunny day, in California, it suddenly starts to rain—inside the car.
For those of us who have read the Old Testament, the story of Samuel's calling, somewhat like the movie, “Oh God,” attempts to make the topic of God's initiative a bit more down to earth.

Samuel, like John Denver's character, did not identify God's call at first. He needed it repeated. He needed to have it interpreted. He needed to be able to recognize it for what it was.

I recall reading, a number of years ago, about a man who owned and operated a second-hand store, which he supplied with merchandise he bought at auctions and estate sales. He had a natural knack for collecting interesting things. One day, among the numerous acquisitions from an auction, he had bought a small, rather modern-looking painting for $5.00. He took it home, and admired it there for a week or so, then placed it on a wall in his store among dozens of other art works, with a $25.00 price tag on it. Each day he continued to admire it, although he did not know why.

Nearly a week passed, before a curious stranger wandered into the store. The woman asked the man to take down the small painting so she could look at it, and after but a few minutes pulled out $25.00 and bought it.

It turned out to be a Picasso that was worth, perhaps, $0.5 million.

The painting was attractive to the storeowner, but he did not know why. He was not prepared to recognize it for what it was.

Was it God acting through the purchase of the knowledgeable browser that educated the storeowner rather quickly? I don't know! I do know, from my own experience, that God uses others to educate us. I am quite sure that God uses poets and artists and musicians to help us know what beauty and truth are.

The drama here is very direct, but it is also very quiet, and it is very personal, reminding us again of the advice we find elsewhere in the scriptures, not to seek God in the thunder or the earthquake, but in the "still, small voice."

Eli perceived that the Lord was calling. Without alarming Samuel, he advises Samuel to "Go lie down, and if he calls you again, say (and I like the poetic words of the old King James Bible), speak Lord, for thy servant heareth." And from that day, Samuel became a great leader—a man of God, who did God-like things.

Fortunately for Samuel, Samuel had a very good teacher. He also had the ability to move beyond his teacher.

During my lifetime, I believe I have moved beyond some of my teachers, but not beyond all of them, and certainly not beyond God.
The main point I would like to stress today is that it has taken a great many people--my parents, family members, pastors, teachers, friends, mentors, confidants, colleagues: a great many people, all of them together, with God--to make me the person that I am now. I am not sure that they have always done their best for me, nor am I sure that I have always done my best for them, but I do know that we have done whatever has been done together, and that I have not done it on my own.

So, we go to church every week. We ask for God's grace before each meal. We pray. We do these things so that, when the time comes, we might recognize God's calling. And, with that understanding, what better prayer could we pray at the end of a busy day, than, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

AND THEN, WE NEED TO BE QUIET, AND WE NEED TO LISTEN!

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Epiphany 2
Date: 16 January 2000
Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

It’s not safe here.

It’s not safe to sit here in this building.

Please don’t get me wrong. The building is solid. The pews are not going to collapse from under you. The roof is not going to cave in. I am certain that no gunmen are going to come here today to gun us down. But, according to the Bible, buildings that are used for sincere religious purposes are not safe.

Have you ever thought about this?

We sit here in fairly comfortable pews and in a beautiful sanctuary. Everything is clean and orderly and respectable. And yet, we are not safe. In fact, if we are to take the Bible seriously, we better prepare ourselves for the unexpected. After reading the first lesson, if we take what we hear seriously, perhaps the ushers should pass out crash helmets rather than bulletins.

Church is not safe! Holy places are not safe. Just ask Samuel.

When Samuel was twelve, he learned that hanging around the church was not safe. He was sleeping one night in his church, when someone called out his name and awakened him. He did not fall asleep while listening to a sermon; he was hired to sleep at his church. He thought the person calling out his name was Eli, who was also hired to sleep at the church, so he ran to where Eli was sleeping and asked him what he wanted. But Eli told the boy that he did not call Samuel. This happened three times. After the third time,
Eli told the boy that if the voice called him again to say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,” which I personally think is very close to, “If you wake me one more time, I am going to wring your little neck.”

God’s encounter with Samuel reminds me of the kind of TV advertisements I saw when I was a kid: “Alice!,” booms a thunderous voice out of nowhere, “Why are you using that laundry detergent?”

(Today, all we seem to have on the TV screen is ridiculous cereal commercials and that stupid advertisement for orange juice that features the talking leftover sandwich in the refrigerator. Wouldn’t you just like to grab that little sucker out of that refrigerator and stomp on him?)

Commercials on TV, however, are not easily compared to commercials in the Bible. The Bible reports that when Samuel stopped to hear the commercial, some surprising things happened that affected the rest of his life. Why? Because, Samuel was not in a safe, homey environment. The scene was in his church, and church is not a safe place to be.

Andrew Young, a United Church of Christ minister, who is the Mayor of Atlanta, who marched with Martin Luther King decades ago, told a story about his college-aged daughter. He was delighted that she had become active in a church. As she became more involved, she became more excited about her church and her faith.

One day she announced to her parents that she was going to Uganda to build houses for the poor. Her dad confessed that he tried to talk her out of it. He wanted her to go to church, and he wanted her to develop a relationship with God, but he also wanted her to find a nice Christian man to marry, and settle down. He was not ready for the decision that she made. At least he did not intend for her to go so far with it so soon.

She told him that she had been called by God to go to Uganda to build houses for the poor. What could he do? What could he say? You see, it is very dangerous to hang out in churches. People’s lives can be changed.

When I was a child, if someone yelled out, “Hey, Tom,” or even, “Hey you,” I would probably have responded in a positive way with, “Hey!” I still do.

Today! Today, if you yell “Hello!” to people, especially young people, the response might be something like, “You talkin’ to me?”

Today, the possibility of God talking to us seems almost impossible. Why? Because, WE have become so impossible. We make it impossible. God tries to get through to us continually, but all we can say is, “You talkin’ to me?” We are impossible!

Samuel was a kid trying to solve a mystery. I am certain that each one of us, at some point in our lives, was a child trying to solve a mystery. We stopped what we were doing.
We listened. We waited. We did not just blurt out, “You talkin’ to me?”, as if we did not believe that anyone could really be interested in talking to us at that time.

We church-going folk have our comfort zones, but we leave them each week to go to church, where God keeps calling us to leave our comfort zones for a time, in order to do things that God wants us to do: to give some of our time, our talents, and our treasure for God’s work. And we take that risk. Many people do not take that risk, but we do.

People who like to play it safe, who never take risks, who never go out on a limb for anyone but themselves, usually don’t go to church. Why? Because it’s too risky. It’s not safe!

So be careful as you sit here this morning, and be careful as you go through this week. Watch and wait and listen, because God will be trying to encounter you. God will be trying to get through.

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Epiphany 4  
Date: 02 February 1997  
Title: “Concerned Living”

All three of the scripture lessons for this morning provide a good opportunity for a sermon on the meaning and purpose of preaching in the Christian Church, because, they all emphasize the need for concerned living in relation to others.

As I begin with the subject of preaching, you may find some comfort in my telling you that this sermon will be shorter than usual, because of the other important things we have to do today. First, though, here is a diversion, just to make this short sermon a little bit longer.

I would like to share with you an experience I had on an Easter Sunday morning nearly two decades ago. I decided to preach a rather short sermon; it was only about ten minutes long, because we were receiving new members that Easter morning, we were celebrating communion, we had an extra anthem, and an additional hymn or two, and I thought, “Enough is enough. I will be as brief as possible in the pulpit.”

Well, as George H. W. Bush might put it: “Not a good idea; wrong; not prudent; bad decision.” While shaking my hand after the service, a so-called church member, who probably thought that the church was always decorated with either lilies or poinsettias, said, "Well, that was certainly a short sermon."

She did not say, “Good morning,” or, “Happy Easter.” Just, "Well, that was certainly a short sermon."
In conversations with a number of church members during the following week, all of them commented about the woman who complained about the sermon being too short. "I bet you've never heard that one before," said one person. Another said, "How can a sermon be too short?" I wasn't sure of how to take that. When the church treasurer mentioned it to me, I said, "I guess she felt that she didn't get her money's worth." The treasurer looked at me strangely, then smiled and replied, "I'm quite sure she did."

Christian witness means concerned living. Concerned living means more than attending worship twice a year. Concerned living means more than attending worship each week. Christian witness means more than supporting the church financially. For "preach-ers," Christian witness means more than preaching sermons. For "preach-ees," i.e. worshippers in the pews, Christian witness means more than listening to sermons.

So, let us take a brief look at each of this morning's lessons, because I think there is an interesting connection that can be made between them and our topic for today.

The Old Testament lesson attempts to define true prophecy. We might pause together here, to think about the importance of prophetic preaching, which helps us as a congregation to remember God's saving activity through the ages. This is so important, because prophetic preaching helps us to remember, helps us to recall, helps us to re-experience and recite the old, old story.

In Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth, the apostle emphasizes Christian witness. I am not going to get hung up on all the business about eating meat that was offered as a sacrifice to idols. People do not do that today, so let us just skip over the details and get to the real meat of Paul's message, as it were.

I remember a fellow seminarian, who, after studying this passage, in particular verse thirteen, became a little puffed up by his new knowledge, and decided he should become a vegetarian. Well, that is all fine and good, but the guy missed Paul's main point, entirely.

Paul was very critical of the Corinthian Christians who were probably a little bit like us sometimes: When it comes to our diets, when it comes to our work, when it comes to the multitudinous activities of our daily lives, we know what we like, and we like what we know. That is not bad. But, we too easily forget that the standards we set for ourselves, according to what we KNOW, are often higher than the standards of God's love. That's right, I said higher, not lower.

Paul is saying that if we as Christians live in the light of our Christian knowledge alone, we are demonstrating a genuine lack of Christian comprehension. Why? Because, what we know is not what really matters. What really matters is for you and for me to be known by God, and to be called by God, and the evidence of Christian calling is our love for God and our love for others.

As the saying goes, “Love makes the world go 'round.” Knowledge is wonderful. But, love for others is what motivates and directs Christian living.
I love to tell the story
   Of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory,
   Of Jesus and His love;
I love to tell the story
   Because I know 'tis true,
It satisfies my longings
   As nothing else can do.

I love to tell the story!
   'Twill be my theme in glory
To tell the old, old story
   Of Jesus and his love.

That's great! That's wonderful! But, I must also love to LIVE that story to the best of my ability.

We can now, I think, build a bridge to the gospel lesson, which portrays Jesus as a person who really LIVED the story--who really practiced what he preached.

If we as members of Christ's Church can practice what we preach, then we, too, live the story. Jesus’ teachings do not become effective by merely being repeated or discussed. They do not become effective by researching sermons, by writing sermons, by preaching sermons, or by hearing sermons week after week. The teachings of Jesus become effective only when lives are transformed.

Momentarily we will confess our faith, together, and welcome new members into our household of faith. As our congregation grows in numbers, may we also continue to grow in faith together by practicing what we preach. Amen.

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Epiphany 6
Date: 13 February 2000
Homily: “The Leper Who Dared Jesus to Heal Him”
Text: Mark 40-45

When was the last time you felt as though you needed a hug?

When was the last time someone reached out to shake your hand and thank you for something you said or did?

When was the last time someone patted you on the back for a job well done?
I am certain that each of us has experienced such moments. We cherish the touch of others.

When I fell victim to a flu virus a couple of weeks ago, and Mary had begun to recover from her infection with the same virus, she tried to wait on me. One day she walked up the stairs very quietly, and tiptoed into the bedroom where I was pretending to be dead, and asked if I needed anything. I am certain that I probably answered with words to the effect that all I needed at the time was to be left alone.

“Would you like a 7-Up,” she asked?

“Oh, please. That would be so nice.”

Soon she appeared with a glass of cool 7-Up for my hot fever, and she put it on a coaster on the night table by the bed, and then she bent over and kissed me on the forehead.

“Can I get you anything else,” she asked.

“No, thank you. That’s fine.”

I really just wanted to be left alone, but I was so thankful for the attention, and especially for the kiss—the touch.

I believe that most of us have a need to be touched by people who are close to us. We also probably draw back from being touched by people who are not close to us. Being touched by someone with whom we have a healthy and trusting relationship can be extremely helpful, even healing. In wholesome relationships, touching is important. At other times, touching can be very annoying.

Have you observed people in an elevator? I have, and I always find human behavior in an elevator to be strange. The elevator door opens. The first person walks in and goes to one side of the elevator, the next person goes to the other side. The next person to enter stands in the middle. No one says anything to anyone else. Some modern elevators have buttons on both sides of the door. Why? I suppose, because no one would ever think of crossing the floor from the other side to push a button. They will shout from the other side of the elevator, “Would you please push 2,” rather than risk coming into physical contact with the person who was standing in front of the magic buttons.

For decades I have practiced a thankless act of walking into an elevator and greeting the people who are in there. Try this sometime—the next time you happen to be in an elevator. If it is morning, when the elevator door opens and you step in, before you take your place, just look at everyone in the elevator and say, “Good morning everybody, how are you today?” And then just watch them all squeeze a little tighter to the wall they are already pressing against, afraid that you might ask another question, and scared to death that you might touch them. They would rather be mugged.
But touching is important in wholesome relationships, and today we have a story about Jesus reaching out and touching someone in a wholesome relationship.

The gospel lesson says that the man with the leprosy begged Jesus to make him clean. Let us read the lesson again. Our New International Version translation reports that the leper said, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” What does this mean?

Jesus touched people when he healed them, but no one touched lepers. Jesus, according to this opening chapter in the gospel of Mark, was going around healing everyone. So, let us read the leper's words again. The words, “If you are willing,” I think, sound more like, “I dare you to make me clean.” “I dare you to touch me, like you touched all those other people you healed. I dare you.”

Modern biblical scholars have looked at the next words in this gospel passage--“Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man”--and have re-translated that passage as, “Filled with anger, Jesus reached out and touched the man.” Read the rest of the story and you will probably conclude with me that the modern biblical commentators are on to something. This is not a positive story about touching. This is a negative story about touching. The leper dared Jesus to do something that no one would do—touch a leper. Jesus touched the obnoxious, untouchable leper, and healed him, and, as a result of what he did, Jesus was forbidden to enter any town from then on. He was, according to the board of health of his day, as unwelcome as the leper he touched.

Therefore, we have a story about a double dare! The leper dared Jesus to touch him. And Jesus dared to touch the leper.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, the healing ministry of your son Jesus is proclaimed before us this morning. May we bring all that is unclean within us before you, confident that we will not be turned away, but healed and filled with the joy of salvation. Let us dare to cry out to Christ in our need, and may we receive the joy of those whose trouble is removed. All this we ask in the name of Christ Jesus, the Great Physician. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of grace and goodness, your mercy comes to us in ways that continually surprise us, for you appear to offer your mercy with no strings attached, which is so different from the way we often act and live. Naaman's wealth was of no consequence in his healing, and the leper's exclusion from society was no barrier to his being healed by Jesus. Such acts of grace sadly call many of our actions into question as we, too often, place conditions on our love and our acceptance of many people within our communities.

Forgive us, O God, when we deprive people of the love we owe them as people who are unconditionally loved by you. Help us to see people with Jesus' eyes and to be moved by
his compassion, so that we become active and fearless bearers of healing and mercy. Empower us with your Spirit to be barrier-breakers rather than barrier-builders, and remind us, if necessary, over and over, that nothing can separate us, or others, from your love as we experience it in Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior. This we pray in his name. Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Loving God, you have revealed in Jesus that the boundaries of your love are limitless. Through him you have blessed our lives with healing and wholeness. In response to such gracious gifts, we offer these gifts and the service of our lives, as visible and faithful reminders of your radical love and mercy. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Epiphany 7
Date: 20 February 2000
Title: “Let’s Do It Now”
Text: Mark 2:1-12

Not too long ago, I read an interesting story about a woman minister who was writing about the healing stories in Mark, and she remarked that the story of the paralyzed man being lowered through a hole in a roof by his friends, was her favorite. Why? Well, as a child, she had played the part of the paralyzed man in a Bible School play. The big moment in the skit was her Bible School “friends” lowering her down, with ropes, from the church balcony to the main level, strapped to an ironing board. She wrote, “Where was my brain? Worse than that, where was my mother’s brain? Why did she let me do that?”

She continued, “While the entire class and congregation held their breath, I prayed for balance, and that my classmates would not drop me, and for some reason, on the way down, I reviewed all the bad things I had ever done. Twenty feet lower, and grounded at last, I really took the words of Jesus to heart, when my classmate who was playing Jesus said, ‘My son, your sins are forgiven.’”

For weeks we have been reading healing stories from the gospel of Mark. Today’s story is different. It is a long story. It is a vivid story. And, I think, it is a very humorous story. We should read it like a parable and try to place ourselves in the scene, and try to identify with the characters, perhaps not to the point of allowing someone to strap us to an ironing board, but at least to the point of allowing ourselves to ask how this story challenges our lives.

Can we identify with the paralytic? He is certainly one of the least attractive people in the story. If he had not had a few good friends, he would not even be in the story. He does nothing. He does not act out his faith or anything else. His friends do all the acting.
And what about his friends? Who are they? Is this Bob Villa and his crew from the old TV show, Home Improvement, putting in the first skylight? No, it is a few guys who want to get to see Jesus, not for their own sakes, but for the sake of an unfortunate friend.

“We have to go now,” they say to their friend. “Jesus is in town. We know where he is staying. You have to let us take you to him.”

At this point, the story reminds me of an old Irish joke: An Irish priest is doing evangelism at the local pub. He goes up to the first man sitting at the bar and says, "Son, would you like to go to heaven?"

"Yes, father."

"Then go and stand over against the wall."

The priest goes to the second man. "Son, would you like to go to heaven?"

"Yes, father."

"Then go and stand over against the wall."

The priest goes up to the third man, who had been at the bar for some time. "Son, would you like to go to heaven?"

"Ah, no thank you Father!” says the man.

The priest is astounded. "What are you sayin’ lad? You tellin’ me you don't want to go to heaven when you die?"

"Oh, when I die, yes, indeed!” said the man. "I thought you were getting a group together to go right now."

“We have to go now,” said the paralytic’s friends, and they carry the paralytic through town strapped to an ironing board-like pallet, to see Jesus, promising him that they would make sure he would get in the house where Jesus was staying. “It’s Pete’s house. It’s Pete’s mother’s house. Remember Pete!” On the way they fill the guy with the hope of healing. “We’re going to see Jesus at Pete’s mother’s house, and you’re going to get healed.”

But when they get there, the house is packed. People are sitting in the windows, and standing in the doorways. The courtyard is packed, the street is jammed with people, and they find themselves at a standstill, in first century city gridlock. But, they are not to be put off. “Don’t you worry,” they tell their friend. “We’ll get you in.”
They look around, and they decide that if they cannot go through the crowd, they will go over it.

Inside the house, Jesus is healing and teaching. There is so much noise that no one hears the ladder banging against the side of the house. No one hears the footsteps above. No one hears the scraping. The friends of the paralyzed man are innovative in their approach to Jesus—innovative like the Three Stooges, perhaps.

Then, suddenly, inside the house, a ray of sunlight pierces the darkness of the crowded room. Then, more light pours in as sticks and chunks of mud/plaster fall all over the people below. The hole gets bigger and bigger.

Jesus stops and watches along with the crowd. Is there a smile on his face?

Others point up, nudging those beside them, saying, “Look at that woodja!” Some are laughing. Some are very annoyed, especially Peter’s mother, whose roof is being destroyed. I can imagine her being annoyed enough by the crowd in her living room, but a hole in her roof? “It’s a good thing Peter’s friend is a carpenter,” she says to herself, “because he’s going to have a lot of work to do tomorrow.”

Now what? The roof parts stop dropping. Everyone is quiet. The religious leaders, who are present, quietly nudge each other, and say, “See, I told you so. This guy starts this stuff—he goes around telling fantastic stories, heals people, and now we all have plaster dust in our eyes, and the roof is about to fall in.”

Smiling faces peer down into the room through the hole. A hand waves cheerfully at the crowd below. Something big and heavy is being pulled across the roof. A large package is lowered down on ropes. With every jerk of the ropes, a grunt emerges from the package. It was coming down and no one could stop it.

A few minutes pass as the people in the room notice that it is a cot—a stretcher—something—with a man on it. Soon it rests on the floor right in front of Jesus. Whatever Jesus might have been saying to the crowd is lost, but that does not bother Jesus. He receives the moment as a gift from God—a teachable moment.

After twenty-three years in the ministry, I know that ministry often happens like that—when God breaks in unexpectedly, and opens up new possibilities. I like to call them, “teachable moments.”

Then, the silence is broken. Jesus says to the man, “Your sins are forgiven.”

The smiles on his friend’s faces fall off and smash into bits on the floor below. “What? We didn’t do all this for our friend to have his sins forgiven. We brought him here to get healed.”
The same thing happens today. Many people, even the most religious, call on Jesus for all sorts of reasons. They pray for healing. They pray for love. They pray for money. They pray for their favorite football team before a game. Do they pray for what they really need?

Forgiveness?

“Your sins are forgiven,” says Jesus

“Wait a minute! That’s not why our hands are all bloody from tearing a hole in the roof. That isn’t what this crowd came here to see.”

Meanwhile, the religious leaders who witnessed the scene were furious. “Who does he think he is, forgiving sins?”

On the spot, Jesus takes advantage of another teaching moment. The whole room is filled with the sound of murmuring now. “What is more difficult,” asks Jesus in a voice loud enough to be heard by all, “to say to this man ‘your sins are forgiven,’ or to say to him, ‘stand up, take your cot, and walk out of here.’”

At this point, isn’t the lesson very obvious? Isn’t it very clear?

Who among us can test whether a person’s sins, another’s or ours, are forgiven? As a minister, I could stand here all day long and say to you, “Your sins are forgiven, your sins are forgiven, your sins are forgiven…” and, when you left, who would know if they were or not?

But a healing—well, as the saying goes, “the proof is in the pudding.” Forgiveness doesn’t prove anything. A healing would prove something.

The man is still lying here. He has not budged. Sins forgiven? Maybe. We don’t know. He doesn’t know. He probably doesn’t care. That is not why his friends brought him here. But wait. Jesus is going to say something else to the man. Quiet everybody. Quiet!

“So that you might really know that your sins are forgiven, stand up, take your cot, and go home!”

The smiles return to the faces of the man’s four friends, who dared to open up a new possibility for their friend. Did they really understand what they did? Maybe. We don’t know. But they opened up a new possibility. First, according to the Bible, they invented the world’s first skylight. Then they dared to entertain the notion that God might actually break into life in unusual ways, if they only believed. Then they got their friend to Jesus, and the possibilities for healing and for forgiveness broke open into reality. This happened, however, step by step. They believed. They acted. Then, came the forgiveness. Then, came the healing. In that order!
They believed. They acted, and they got their friend to Jesus.

“And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this.’”

* Epiphany 8  
Date: 27 February 2000  
Text: 2 Corinthians 3:1-6

In the New Testament lesson this morning, Paul is “taking stock.”

How do we “take stock” of ourselves? How is your life going? How is my life going?

As a minister, I have often paused to review my ministry, and to “take stock” of what is happening or not happening.

Not long ago, I was reading about a minister who was trying to do exactly that, and he noted a little joke he had heard, about the first review to be written for the first restaurant that will be opened on the moon. The headline will read, “Great view, no atmosphere!”

What do people think about us? What do they think about our testimony as Christians? Oh, he or she is a great looking Christian, but he or she is “all thin air”—great view, no atmosphere?

How are we doing with authentic Christianity? Are we to be believed? As the old evangelistic question used to put it, if we were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?

Let’s begin with me. Who am I to stand before you this morning as your pastor?

Well, decades ago I graduated from seminary and finished a rigorous training period to become a “real” minister. My academic background was studied, my credentials verified, my personal background checked out, my faith statement studied, my references consulted; then I was ordained, and suddenly, I became a “real” minister.

Well, fine! “Great view! No atmosphere!”

Here I am, but who am I? Does the profile fit the picture? People should ask questions like this with an open mind and open heart, because all members of the body of Christ need to be accountable.
Our lesson this morning is a test for accountability. It is also a remarkable letter of recommendation. Such letters were especially important in the days of the early church. They provided the only means for fledgling congregations to know whether a new prophet or teacher, who appeared on the scene, had the right credentials, and if he could be trusted. The system, however, had been sorely tested in Corinth. Appearing there were some folk with impressive letters of introduction, who had been received into the membership. Soon after they were received into membership, they asked the church if Paul had come to them with a letter of introduction, as they had. They implied that Paul did not have proper credentials.

In reality, of course, their implications were outrageous. First of all, when Paul first arrived in Corinth, there was no church. He founded it. It was a product of his ministry. That seems like pretty good credentials to me. But then again, Paul might not have fared so well with a pulpit/search committee, if they had really checked him out during his first visit. What were his real credentials? Well, he spent most of his ministry years in jail. He never made enough money from his work to have a home of his own, and he ran around so much that he never had a permanent residence. He never built a church building. He never spoke on TV, or had a radio show. He usually had to have a second job to support himself. He had a very unimpressive appearance, to put it mildly, and even he admitted that he was a poor speaker.

How would he rate with a pulpit committee today, with credentials like that? Would anyone have called him to a pastorate? Would such a profile fit the accepted scheme of what makes for success in the ministry today? No wonder they had trouble with him in Corinth.

That is what the church folk in Corinth were thinking when Paul wrote this letter with these wonderful words in Chapter 3:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, known and read by all [men]; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Corinthians 3:1-3 RSV)

It is amazing to me--it is unbelievable--that these people would think that when Paul returned to them, that he would need a letter of recommendation. He had led them to Christ, but if he comes back, he is going to need a letter from John, or Peter, or James, or one of the “real” apostles. So, Paul writes to them, “Are you kidding? Do you really mean that? What are you thinking?”

“You are our letter of recommendation. Christ has written it on your hearts. He didn’t use paper; he didn’t deliver it on stones, like Moses; he wrote it on your hearts, and the ink he used was the Holy Spirit. I’m just the delivery boy. I just delivered the letter. God did the work through Christ, and Christ changed you.”
The real mark of a Christian is the mark put on us by Christ—a real mark, clearly visible in the serving ministry that shines from our hearts. That is how we are known as Christians, and how we know one another as Christians in a hostile world. Surely, there are other marks of accountability, whether we serve as shepherd or sheep, but each of them must reflect the mark put on us by the Good Shepherd.

When I read Paul’s letters, I am always impressed, and usually amazed at the lack of space in his letters concerning the Church and its ministry. It is so obvious that those early Christians did not go around, as many members of many churches do today, talking about what the church can do for YOU, or about the value of becoming a member of a church. The Church does not do anything for anybody. It is Christ who changes lives. It is Christ who heals a hurting heart. It is Christ who touches a lonely spirit. It is Christ who restores people.

Therefore, Paul wrote a letter to the folk in Corinth, to say that Christ wrote Paul’s letter of recommendation, not Paul. They are witness to that fact. Their changed lives are the testimony, and that is all the recommendation he needs to be considered as an authentic Christian.

Am I an authentic Christian? Are you? Or are we like the restaurant on the moon—all view and no atmosphere?

Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, “Everybody can see that Christ has done something to you.” An old poem communicates the same idea:

We are the Bible the careless world will read.  
We are the sinner’s Gospel; we are the scoffer’s creed.  
We are the Lord’s last message, written in deed and word,  
What if our line is crooked; what if your type is blurred?

May our lines never be crooked, and our type never be blurred, and when others look closely at us, may they see Jesus written on our heart.

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Epiphany 9  
Date: 05 March 2000  
Meditation

The message I prepared for this morning is based upon the Old and New Testament lessons.

What do you want to be when you grow up?  
This is a serious question!
What do you want to be when YOU grow up?

When did people start asking you that question?

I do not remember asking [my son] Allen that question. When he was very young he would simply declare from time to time what or whom he wanted to be when he grew up. But then, when he was three years old, and Mary announced to him that he would be four years old on his next birthday, and he would be going to Kindergarten in a different school, he stopped declaring what he wanted to be when he grew up.

You see, he really enjoyed the Montessori School he attended, and he enjoyed his teachers and his friends there, and he really could not comprehend what the change in his future actually meant.

He was silent for quite some time, until, one day, he declared that he DID NOT WANT TO GROW UP. He really enjoyed being himself, and he did not want to be anyone else. Period!

I think I recall feeling about the same way when I graduated from high school, perhaps. I think I have also felt that way a number times since then. I also guess that we, all of us, are born trying to answer that question.

So, what do YOU want to be when YOU grow up?

When we were younger, we had dreams, we had hopes, we had plans, and we had ideas.

NOW WHAT?
NOW WHAT DO WE WANT TO GROW UP TO BE?

Elisha knew what he wanted to be when he grew up. He was Elijah’s prize student, and when Elijah was dying, Elisha decided that he would like to grow up to be just like Elijah, and he told Elijah so.

Elisha wanted to pattern his life after a person whose life really mattered. Then suddenly, the life he wanted to duplicate, vanished.

What role models did you choose when you were young?

What role models do our young people have to choose from? Athletes? TV stars? Young children today seem to know more about Michael Jordan and MTV than they know about God.

The lesson in all this, however, is that this is not a modern problem.
As we move our attention from the Old Testament to the new one, we find the Apostle Paul constantly reminding and urging people to pattern their lives after Christ. Why? Because, Christ is a good example!

If you really want to grow up to be somebody, who really is SOMEBODY, instead of just anybody, then, consider Jesus Christ.

This morning we gather around this table to remember that. We gather here, to remember Jesus as somebody. This bread and this cup remind us of a real somebody, a real role model.

We come here, today, to a table that he prepared for us. And we come to receive the grace that he offered to all who would do this in remembrance of him.

So, what do YOU want to be when YOU grow up?

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Last Sunday After Epiphany  
Transfiguration Sunday  
Date: 09 February 1997  
Title: “A Glimpse of Holiness”  
Texts: 2 Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9

Which, do you think, is the more fantastic story this morning. Let's have a vote! I am not going to ask you to raise hands or anything of the kind. I just want you to vote in your own mind.

How many would vote for the great scene of Elijah ascending in a whirlwind into heaven? If you are like me, I like to envision Elijah driving that chariot of fire with the horses of fire. I can envision him jumping on board as the chariot flared by, grabbing the reins, and calling out to the horses to take him on to heaven. How many of you would choose the Elijah story as the most fantastic?

How many of us here this morning would choose the story of the transfiguration of Jesus as the most fantastic? When I read this story, I think of scenes from space movies, in particular the final scene of "Close Encounters of a Third Kind," when the space saucer slowly descends upon the table mountain [Devil’s Tower, near Sundance, Wyoming], and everyone is bathed in blinding light and nothing is the same afterward. What do you think?

Moses and Elijah appear from the past. They must have been traveling back through time on a starship for ages, just so they could be there on that day. So, how many of you 'trekkies' would choose the story from Mark's gospel over the story from 2 Kings?
I am not trying to be sacrilegious. I am deliberately trying to point out the kind of heavenly imagery with which we are dealing.

I am also trying, gently, to awaken familiar images, which we have formed in our own minds from time to time. When our son, Allen, was very young--and I would not be telling you this if he were here--I used to read passages like these from the Bible to him. I never found him to be scared. Like most young children, he had a great imagination. A flaming chariot--with flaming horses! Wow! (As Jesus once said, unless you can enter the kingdom of God as a child, you might not get in.)

Therefore, let us take the imagery of these two stories as the imagery is. Because, I do not believe that we need to analyze these texts at all. We do need to appreciate them for what they are. The message is simple in both. God's word goes on. God's word does not stop.

First, there was Moses, then there were other prophets, eventually there was the great prophet Elijah, then Elisha, and others, and then there was Jesus. Everything before Jesus was chapter one. Then, there was Jesus. Now we are in chapter two.

As Christians, we live in chapter two. We know this from the ending of today's gospel lesson: "Then the cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus."

That is the story. That's it! The story isn’t any more complicated than that, and it certainly is not any more simple than that: "...they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus."

The sixteenth century Protestant reformer, John Calvin, wrote about this passage:

It is noteworthy that God's voice sounded out of the cloud; God's body or his face was not seen. Therefore we may remember the saying of Moses: “God did not put on a visible form, lest we should be deceived and think that God is like a man. True it is that in times past God appeared in divers forms to the holy fathers, in which they might know God. Yet God always abstained from symbols which offered a possibility of fabricating idols. And indeed, since human minds are more prone to gross fantasies, it would be useless to add oil to the flames. This was an especially bright manifestation of God's glory. From the interposing veil God invites us to Himself by His voice. How absurd it is, then, to want God to be present before our eyes in a block of wood or stone! Therefore we learn that it is not by the eyes of the flesh that we penetrate to the light inaccessible in which God dwells, but by faith alone. The voice was uttered from the cloud so that the disciples might know that it came from God and receive it with the reverence due to it.

Calvin, in his day, in his time, was being very pious. He also, for a person of his time, did his best to preach the underlying message without trying to explain the story.
As a former Old Testament scholar at my seminary, I appreciate that. As a one-time college English instructor, I appreciate that. But what does that mean to us this morning?

I hope that your week went better than mine. I really needed Tuesday to make my week work. But, what did I do Tuesday? Well, what did you do Tuesday? (Everyone spent Tuesday dealing with a heavy snowstorm.)

In Wednesday's paper there was a Garfield cartoon that caught my attention. In the first frame, Garfield says to himself, "I hate snow." In the next frame he is standing alone with a few flakes flying about him. In the third frame he is being covered with snow. In the last frame he is completely encased with snow, and the caption says, "And I guess the feelings are mutual."

I needed Tuesday. But Tuesday was taken away from me. What might have been high hours on Tuesday, were very low hours.

The weather of the mind and spirit, I believe, is very much like the weather of our environment. It, too, runs from sunlight, through overcast skies, through dense fog to pitch darkness. Yet, spiritual truth has its hours and days of high visibility when it is transfigured above us.

When life goes into eclipse, when darkness covers the face of the sun, when joy gives way to sorrow, when success gives way to failure, when hope gives way to despair, we still have Jesus to bring us God's sustaining word of comfort and God's enabling word of hope.

"This is my beloved Son," said the voice out of the cloud. “Listen to him."

Listen to him!

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Lent 1  
Date: 16 February 1997  
Title: “Lento”  
Hymn: “Take Time To Be Holy”  
Related Texts: Psalm 25:1-10, Mark 1:9-15

Do you take time to be holy?

There's an old saying, “you can't turn an elephant on a dime.”

During the season of Lent, since ancient times, Christians have been asked to turn their lives around from where their lives are to where they would like their lives to be. Of course, if
one should like to make a change of course in one's life, one will need to chart that course, and, most likely, proceed through time, slowly.

You can’t turn an elephant on a dime.

If you should choose to turn an elephant, first of all, you need space, and you need time, and you better make sure that the elephant is facing in the direction you want the elephant to be facing once you have turned the elephant.

From my experience, as an avid sailor, one cannot change the course of a sailboat at whim. If I want to get over there (point straight ahead), I may have to sail back and forth from there (left) to there (right) a number of times, in order to get to there (straight ahead), and when I should finally pull up to the dock, the wind must be coming over the correct side of the boat.

Human will is one thing; the laws of nature are another.

Before the Second World War, great ocean liners ruled the waves. As great ships became greater, one of the major engineering problems that faced the ship designers was, how to maneuver the fast-moving ships. As the rudders for great ships got larger, they demanded more and more power in order to turn them. Eventually, there was not enough power available to turn the huge rudders. Inevitably, engineers soon designed a small rudder on the end of the big rudder. Its purpose was, literally, to sail the large rudder into the desired position, thus relieving pressure on the big rudder so that the available power could push the big rudder where it needed to go.

You can’t turn an elephant on a dime.

Since the beginning of Christianity, the season of Lent has been a season of self-examination, self-denial, penitence, prayer, and concern for the less fortunate. In all of these things, we deal with the passage of time. With this in mind, I would like to tell you about Bill.

As the newly arrived minister of Pastoral Care, at a large urban Congregational church, I was asked to visit the homebound. One of the homebound members was Bill, but Bill did not live at home. Bill's address was at the Milwaukee VA hospital in a ward full of forgotten men. He had been there about a year, because his wife didn’t know what else to do with him.

A year or so before I met Bill, he had been vacationing at his summer home in Door County, Wisconsin. It was a hot summer day, and Bill, who was feeling very warm, impulsively jumped off his dock into the frigid waters of Green Bay, instead of into the waters of his heated swimming pool. Fortunately, he and his wife had a number of guests who sprang into action when Bill failed to come to the surface.

In order to make a very long story shorter, Bill had a severe stroke that paralyzed his left side and part of his right side. He could not move. He could not breath without a respirator.
At one point, the family gathered to decide whether or not to keep Bill on life support. They decided that if he could not live without life support by a certain day, they would ask the physician in charge to disconnect the life support system and let Bill have his peace. On the specified date, the life support system was disconnected, and Bill continued to breath on his own, but with great difficulty. Slowly his breathing improved, but, for months, Bill could not speak. Then, one day he made up for his silence.

Our first encounter was very brief. The second time I visited Bill, he told me a joke. We talked. I offered a prayer before I left. We said goodbye.

I visited Bill each month. Each time I visited him he had more to say, and more jokes to tell.

Before his stroke, Bill had been one of the most successful insurance brokers in the Milwaukee area. He was a popular public speaker. Everyone liked him. He had a gift for gab, as some would say.

Many of his friends visited him at the hospital after his stroke, but his visitors became fewer and fewer as they realized that the Bill they had known was no longer to be found. Because breathing was difficult and labored, and because of nerve damage in his face and mouth, his speech was very slow. He could not swallow, and he frequently had to clear his windpipe in a rather disturbing way. When he tried to talk, the intervals between his short phrases were so long, that most people became impatient when they visited him and left as soon as they could.

I soon discovered, however, that Bill was a master at story telling, and a master at telling jokes. As our visits continued over the course of a year or so, I was amazed at the vitality of thought packed into Bill's storytelling.

Then, one day, after a lengthy visit, which involved a timely exchange of jokes, as I offered to pray with Bill before I left, he said to me, haltingly, "I have a prayer to pray today."

Bill had just completed dictating to his wife a brilliant essay on how to remember and tell a joke, and he promised me a copy of it. As he began to pray, I realized that he had applied his newly formulated knowledge on how to remember and tell a joke, to the practice of prayer. His prayer was very touching, filled with thanks and praise to God for the wonderful life he had experienced, for his family and friends and business associates. And the ending was full of concern for all those whom he assumed he had left behind, and let down, and disappointed. After a pause that was longer than usual, I offered an "Amen." But, Bill kept on praying.

Evidently, Bill had taken some time, perhaps for the first time in his life, to be holy. Coincidentally, Bill's wife soon decided to sell their beautiful two-story home and buy a more modest ground level, one-story house, which she remodeled with ramps for easy access. She arranged for the needed home care and brought Bill home for a weekend, in order to examine their new home. He liked it. Within a few months she put together a home support system that allowed her to bring Bill to their new home. And the new life they
planned together worked very well for many years until Bill's paralysis and the complications of old age could no longer be overcome by human willpower.

What created the turning point after Bill's stroke? I am not certain. I do know that, at a certain point, Bill took some time to be holy. That prayer, his prayer, in that hospital, on that day, was a D-Day in Bill's life. From then on, a number of coincidences occurred that enabled him to become a new person. And the people around him became new people.

The season of Lent should be a time to prepare ourselves for the Easter message of new life. But, new life takes time, and I chose the title of this sermon to impress upon us all the need to take time to be holy during the Lenten season.

The musicians here this morning know that “lento” is a musical term. It means, "slow." By "slow," however, it means between andante and largo, that is, "slowly, but not dragging." During our lifetimes, there may very well be slow times, however, if we continue to dig deeply as we go slowly, we will still be able to savor life and thereby glorify God.

As we prepare our hearts and minds for Easter, may we proceed prayerfully--slowly, but not dragging. Because, you know, you can't turn an elephant on a dime.

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Lent 2  
Date: 19 March 2000  
Title: "Ashes to Ashes…"  
Texts: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Mark 8:31-38

We did not do it here this past Ash Wednesday, but we have in other years received ashes on our foreheads to remember that we are mortal.

Ashes and dust. Dust and ashes. They are part of the theme of the season of Lent, and they are important because their symbolism is so real and so true.

We don’t like to think of dust and ashes. We don’t like to spend too much time thinking about our mortality; we would rather accent the positive and eliminate the negative in our lives, but part of life is the realization of our finiteness, our vulnerability, our dustiness, and the ashes of our lives when we seem to be “burned out,” as the old saying goes. Without God’s life-giving Spirit, we are nothing but dust and ashes—as lifeless as the dust of the earth and as dead as the rocks and the dirt beneath our feet.

But we are not here this morning to celebrate the dust. Even though one of our church families lost a loved one this week, and others among us have lost loved ones during the past weeks and months, we are not here this morning to celebrate the dust, but rather to celebrate God’s breath of life.
Our scripture lessons this morning deal with a great message of hope. All deal with the
great contrast between the deadness of the human race, and God’s promise of life. All
accent the positive and seek to eliminate the negative.

Surely, we realize that some people are negative in their approach to life. We usually try
to avoid such people.

I recall a story about a negative gossiper—and I don’t mean the type of gossiper who
spreads negative news about others in order to somehow, as best as he or she can,
demonstrate his or her concerns about everyone and everything—I mean the type of
malicious, negative gossiper who always, and without exception, spreads negative details
about negative opinions about everyone. May God spare us from such people, but we all
probably know that every town has at least one.

One morning, a gossipy woman in a small town drove to the grocery store, and noticed a
familiar truck parked in front of the tavern. “Well,” she said to herself, “that’s Henry’s
truck from down the street.”

Earlier that morning, Henry’s truck broke down right in front of the tavern. So, he rolled
it up to the curb and parked it right in front of the tavern door and walked over to the
service station where he usually had his truck serviced, only to learn that the mechanics
could not work on his truck until the next morning.

During the afternoon the woman drove downtown to mail a few letters AND to check on
the truck, and, sure enough, it was still there, now joined by a number of other trucks and
cars as the tavern’s Happy Hour approached. “Well, well,” she said to herself! As soon as she got home, she got on the phone. By supper time half the town knew that
Henry’s truck had been in front of the bar all day long, and by bedtime the story had
reached the far dusty corners of every house in town. By the next morning, even Henry
had learned about the tale—that he had been in the bar all the day before.

Later that morning, when his truck was repaired, Henry went on with his usual busy
schedule, except for one change in his daily routine. Just before the supper hour, he
parked his truck a few blocks from his house, right in front of the gossiper’s front door,
and he left it there all night.

Emily Dickinson began one of her poems with, “The world feels dusty.”

There is a lot of dust and ashes around all the time, isn’t there! Without God’s Creating
Spirit, breathing life into our lives, how dusty—how full of ashes our lives would be.

Our first lesson this morning describes the dusty life of Abraham. As Paul says in
Romans, Abraham considered his old body to be worse than dust—he was as good as
dead. His wife Sarah was not far behind him. They had reached that point in their lives
when many people sit in rocking chairs on their porches, or, as many people do in Nashua
all summer long, sit on lawn chairs in their open garages, keeping track of everyone who drives by, trying to remember what day it is, and wondering when the evening paper will be delivered.

Then God makes his way into Abraham’s dusty life, and says to Abraham, “I want to make a deal with you. You walk blameless before me the rest of your life, and great things are going to happen for you and for your wife Sarah.” And God blessed Abraham and Sarah, and they blessed God.

Of course, this does not happen without a chuckle or two. When God tells Abraham that he and Sarah will have a son, Abraham laughs his head off. “I’m way too old to be chasing my own children,” he says to God.

Then God replies, “Well, Abraham, that’s your way—your old dusty way, but I am God around here, and I have other plans.”

Thousands of years later, Peter was sitting with the disciples listening to Jesus. Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer. “He will be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes,” he told them. He will be killed, and on the third day he will be raised from the dead. Jesus said this plainly so that they would not misunderstand him.

But Peter pulled Jesus aside. "No, Lord, you have it all wrong. You are the Messiah, the anointed one of God. Just a minute ago you asked me whom I thought you were, and I said you are the Messiah, and I believe that. You are supposed to go to Jerusalem, and all the people will hail you as king. You will not die. You will live forever. Long live the King!"

But Jesus said, "Peter, you have it all wrong. That is this world's dusty way, but my way is different. My way is to bring life out of death. The world says, ‘Look out for yourself; save what you've got.’ But my way says, ‘If you try to preserve your life, you will lose it, and if you lose your life for my sake, you will preserve it unto eternal life.’ This is my way of doing things. This is my Father's way of doing things.”

We live in a world where dust and ashes are a reality. There is the lifelessness of our stone cold, dusty, culture. There is the aging of our own bodies. There is the death of our loved ones. There are criminal acts of violence all around us. And there is the lifelessness of the dusty souls of people who try to live without God.

These things are real. They cannot be denied or painted over. Our culture may exalt youth, but in doing so it denies mortality. Instead of continually cleaning out the dusty corners of our lives, we try to remain eternally young. Meanwhile, life goes on, and we continue to come from, and return to, DUST.

In spite of this, Christ offers us hope. This is what our Scripture lessons show us today. God created life where there was none. God perpetuated life where there was no hope for
perpetuation, not even a twinkle in Abraham’s eye. God brought eternal life out of the
death of Jesus Christ. And, likewise, he can take the dead and lifeless parts of our lives
and breathe new life into them.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, you reached into Abraham and Sarah’s lives and asked them to dream the
impossible dream; that you would transform what appears to have been a barren and
lifeless situation into one overflowing with promise and hope Through faith, they
believed your promises.

May we also have trust and faith in your promises and grow ever stronger in faith, fully
convinced of your ability to fulfill your promises to us.

Breathe your Spirit afresh into our hearts and minds and into our lives, so that we may
have the courage to follow you wherever you lead us. Warm us by the gift of your Spirit
so that we can worship you with our whole being.

Amaze us anew, we pray, with the faithfulness of Abraham and his belief in your
staggering promises of a fruitful future. Confront us afresh with wonder at your desire to
relate to humanity through a covenant established by you.

We worship you, O God, with awe, knowing that you care so much for us. Accept, we
pray, this worship that comes from thankful hearts, for we offer it in Jesus' name. Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Living God, we offer these gifts as signs of our gratitude for your faith in us. May they
also be signs of our unashamed love for your son, Jesus, and of our belief in the power of
the Holy Spirit to give us the strength we need to take up our crosses and follow him.
Amen.

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Lent 3
Date: 02 March 1997
Title: “For Fast Relief, Take Two Tablets”
Text: Exodus 20:1-17

The sermon this morning is a homily on the lesson from the book of Exodus. My sermon
title, I confess, is plagiarized from a series of advertisements for churches, published by a
company called the Church Ad Project of Rosemount, Minnesota. The Ad Project, as they
call themselves, write in their catalogue:
The Ad Project functions as your church's advertising agency. Even though we don't do custom work, we nonetheless provide extremely high quality ads, along with helpful advice and guidance through the book, *Adverting The Local Church*. The Ad Project, with a tradition of maintaining the highest standards for religious advertising, continues to receive awards and recognition within the advertising community. We are committed to providing new and challenging ads, which can assist all kinds of churches in their evangelism ministries. As the new ads demonstrate, we are helping churches address current issues with provocative questions and with humor. We're proud to serve as your agency!

Ad Project ads, posters and postcards are sometimes as good as their publisher thinks they are. For instance, one has a picture of a large percolating coffee maker, one of those 100-cuppers that can be found only in church kitchens. The caption reads, "Free Coffee. Everlasting Life. Yes, membership has its privileges." Below the caption, in small print, we read, "If you really want to belong to something special, become a regular at our church. You'll receive the kind of perks that last a lifetime. Or even longer."

Another ad pictures a large, leather-bound Bible, above which the caption reads, "So you've made a New Year's resolution to get in shape. How about lifting one of these?" Underneath, in small print, we read, "This year, why not lift something that improves your soul as well as your body? Join us this Sunday as we worship in the faith and fellowship of Jesus Christ."

I have seen a number of Ad Project ads in newspapers in recent years, but one ad from their catalogue, I have never seen in a paper, because, well--see for yourself. The picture is of six men struggling to carry a coffin in a funeral procession. The caption reads, "Will it take six strong men to bring you back into the church?" Underneath, in small print, we read, "Our church welcomes you no matter what condition you're in, but we'd really prefer to see you breathing. Come join us in the love, worship and fellowship of Jesus Christ this Sunday."

One of my favorites is a cropped picture of Moses holding two stone tablets, with one hand pointing to the writing on the tablets. The caption reads, "For fast, fast, fast relief, take two tablets." Underneath, in small print, we read, "In our church, we believe that some of the oldest ideas are still the best. Like the regular worship of God. Come join us as we celebrate this Sunday."

Yes, I plagiarized my sermon title, but please also notice that Ad Project does a great job at plagiarism, also. We Christians know that, indeed, some of the oldest ideas are still the best. Jesus reminded his followers of this, continually.

No matter how current the issue, no matter how trendy the presentation, most of the important things in life remain the same.

In the book of Exodus, God's law is presented to God's people as a gift. For fast relief, take two tablets, yes, but not for a quick cure. We are to receive God's law as a gift.
This morning's Old Testament lesson is only the first of many legal codes that we find in the Bible. All of the Old Testament legal codes combined, however, serve one basic purpose: to present the central role of God's law as a divine gift of salvation to God's people. They tell us who God is. They tell us how to worship God. And they tell us how to live as the people of God.

They are not a code of ethics.

Some Christians try to impose the Bible's legal codes on others, as if they are codes of ethics, only to miss the main point of understanding God's law as a gift. The Ten Commandments, in particular, simply do not contain enough commands to provide a comprehensive rule for living. This is not to say that we should refer to them as the Ten Suggestions. This is to say, that instead of reading the commandments as a strict list of does and don'ts, we should be reading them so that we may more fully understand the character of God. God is our Savior. These codes do not so much dictate how we should live our lives as they put content into the character of God. The Ten Commandments do not so much move us into proper social activity as they move us toward God. The movement is not from social activity to God, but, rather, from God to social activity. We need to get to God, first.

We read the commandments not to learn about us, but to learn about God. They are a divine gift of salvation, and as God’s gift they purify us, and they protect us.

So, for fast relief, take two tablets.

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Lent 3
Date: 26 March 2000
Title: “The Day Jesus Cleaned House”
Text: John 2:15-22

We live in a society in which the marketplace is everywhere. Even if we were to make Lent a time in which we fast from the onslaught of marketing in the electronic media by simply turning off our TVs, we would still face advertising each time we left our homes on our way to work, or school, or shopping, or to some form of recreation. We would still see billboards, signs and storefronts. We would still have to buy and sell in order to conduct the everyday business of living.

In today’s gospel lesson, we hear that even in Jesus’ time marketing excesses were so common that buying and selling had crept into the temple square.

Jesus’ response to this misuse of the temple area is markedly different from most of the accounts we have of Jesus’ ministry, in which he overturns religious and cultural expectations by unexpected behavior and radically different ways of thinking about situations. In the case of the temple moneychangers, Jesus’ actions literally turn the
tables, as he drives the moneychangers out of the temple in a passionate attempt to keep the temple a place of pure motives and clean hearts.

Isn’t that the mission of most churches—to try to keep their places of worship as gathering places for people with pure motives and clean hearts?

“Give me a pure heart, O Lord, And renew a right spirit within me,” cried the psalmist.

What better words could one bring to church each Sabbath morning than these? Dear God, renew a right spirit within me—help me clean my house.

One day, Jesus entered the temple and discovered that there were no pure motives there, and no clear indication that anyone there, at the time, was trying to display a clean heart. And, boy, was he steamed! No one else seemed to be cleaning the house, so he cleaned the house. He reminded the people assembled in the temple that people of faith are to worship God in spirit and in truth. The lesson was simple. The lesson that day, in the temple, was as simple as the lesson of the season of Lent. It’s spring. It’s time to clean your house.

Stop. Reflect. Stop and pray. Take some time to be silent and ask, in silent prayer, for God’s power and grace to change for the better what can be changed in your life. As the old hymn put it, “take some time to be holy,” and clean house. Change what you can change, and then pray also to live in the presence of the gift of God’s redemptive mercy, because, we all know that we ourselves are not capable of changing everything by ourselves.

This Lenten season can be a life-changing experience and a doorway into holy living for all the people of God—for you and for me. It is ours for the asking. That is God’s message for us during this season; that God’s mercy and grace are always before us.

Therefore, may we leave this gathering today in peace of mind and heart? And may the messages from the scripture readings this morning, change us as we reflect upon them.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we acknowledge you as Creator and as Liberator. You are the One who brought the captives out of Egypt and who delivered them from the oppression of slavery. You gave laws that shaped how people were to relate to you, to each other, and to the whole environment. You implored people to worship only you, knowing that whatever was put in your place would become the object of idolatry; that it would become the priority of people's lives. In this time of worship, help us, we pray, to focus on you, O God, as the priority of our lives. Remind us of your steadfast love, revealed so clearly in the new commandment of love, which Jesus disclosed with his life, and, as we especially remember in this period of Lent, with his death. Speak to us anew as we offer this prayer and our worship in Jesus' name and for the sake of your kingdom. Amen.
OFFERTORY PRAYER

Gracious and wise God, you give us the freedom to relate to you through the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. You empower us with the wisdom of your Spirit to proclaim our deliverance from evil through the power of the cross. We offer these gifts and our lives as symbols of our thanksgiving, praying that you will bless them and use them to proclaim the wonders of your love. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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Lent 5
Date: 16 March 1997
Title: “Salvation and Health”
Text: Psalm 51

We who live in our age of science depend on medical doctors for our good health, and with such a strong dependency upon the medical profession, God often seems to be unrelated to medical science. Today, to ask someone how his or her health is, which is a medical question, is quite different from asking the old religious question, "Are you saved?"

Even as every major hospital in recent years has moved toward a more holistic approach to health, salvation and health remain poles apart. Health, for most people, refers only to the body. Salvation refers only to the soul. The two have been moving closer and closer together for the past two decades or so, but there is still a great way to go.

Years ago, when I was serving as an assistant chaplain in a county hospital, I realized more than ever before that a pastor did very little in the way of healing if he only concentrated on the health of the soul. And, a medical doctor could fail miserably if he concentrated only on the health of the body.

Healing and saving. Health and salvation. What is the relationship?

There is an old saying:

   When wealth is lost, nothing is lost;
   When health is lost, something is lost;
   When character is lost, all is lost.

This is a secular way of pointing out the same problem as we consider the relationship between salvation and health. Here, health refers to the body, but character refers to the whole person--body, mind, and spirit.

What makes up the human character? EVERYTHING, ALTOGETHER! The person is all of these together, at once, and then some.
Perhaps a good way to look at the relationship between salvation and health is to take an historical survey of the way in which people have viewed salvation and health through the ages. In the Old Testament, the concept of salvation is derived from the Exodus story about the deliverance of God's chosen people. The Hebrew word for salvation comes from a word that refers to a place of ease and peace. The Hebrew word for health means "mended" or "darned," and refers to a state of wholeness of the individual--where the whole person, as we might say, has it all together.

The familiar word, "shalom," "peace," which our Jewish brothers and sisters use to greet each other, is often translated in the Bible as "health." What are the signs of Shalom in the Bible?

--good tidings to the afflicted
--the binding up of the brokenhearted
--liberty to the captives
--comfort to all who mourn
--and complete health of mind, body and spirit to all.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find that salvation is the central idea. The New Testament Greek word for salvation means, literally, "soundness," and "safety." It, the word for salvation, is used much more often than the Greek verb that means, "to save."

So, which comes first? Salvation or health? Well, perhaps that is the wrong question.

Do you recall what Jesus said to the paralytic? Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven." The man then got up and walked. Salvation and health took place simultaneously. To the woman with the hemorrhage he said, "Your faith has made you well, go in peace and be healed," which literally means, "be a whole person again." Is the soul being emphasized here more than the body? Not really. The emphasis continues to be on the whole person, and salvation and health embrace each other.

Remarkably, this seems to be very close to what modern medical science teaches us; that healing does not take place in the body alone, or in the mind alone, or in the soul alone. Healing and health are matters that concern the whole person. Health involves the whole person. When a person is sick, it is the whole person that must be healed, and it is the whole person that must be saved.

A person is one person: an organic, interconnected, interrelated whole being. God did not deliver us into this world in three different packages--body, mind, and spirit--with a set of directions on how to mix the three. A person is one person. And this one person works very hard each day to control the things that haunt it:

--spiritual loneliness
--the thirst for love
--the thirst for meaning
--the fear of death

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--the riddle of evil
--the mystery of God.

These are not things we can control. Therefore, the choice is often made to just repress them.

I recall a story about an old man who told his doctor, "I've been misbehaving, and my conscience is bothering me."

"And you want something that will strengthen your willpower, is that it," asked the doctor?

"Not exactly," said the man, "I was wondering if you could give me something to weaken my conscience."

But, what happens when we repress the things that bother us? Repression causes conflict and stress within a person and, then, the health of the whole person is at stake.

The Rev. Dr. Edgar Jackson once put it, "More than we are aware, the true source of illness may lurk behind such questions as, what can give my life meaning, or what is the matter with me, or why can't I find inner peace?"

Medical science alone cannot answer these questions, because THEY ARE BASICALLY RELIGIOUS QUESTIONS.

Ministers are often accused of answering questions that no one is asking, and of offering solutions to problems that no one has. But, as far as salvation and health are concerned, where does one begin the healing process? As far as the body is concerned, the medical doctor can treat only symptoms. As far as the mind is concerned, it seems the more we learn about ourselves the more confused we become. Therefore, we need to start somewhere else.

As the great Swiss psychiatrist, Paul Tournier, once put it, "The anguish of the world today is so poignant, the accumulated suffering so flagrant, the threat of the future so grave, that only the heart should lead us."

So what is the picture of salvation and health? Recall, if you will, the words of the Psalmist:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit.

The biblical picture of health is of the whole person. The stories about the healings Jesus performed are about the WHOLE person. In each healing story, healing begins with a faith that can make a person WHOLE no matter what physical state that person is in.

Health, then, is not limited to the body. Health is a way of life! And when health can be understood that way, salvation will never be beyond our reach.
Decades ago, Passion Sunday was celebrated the Sunday before Palm Sunday. Why? Probably, because, in retrospect, it never made much sense to try to celebrate anything else on Palm Sunday.

Most of us humans have difficulty trying to celebrate more than one thing at a time. When it comes to celebrating a joyful event like Palm Sunday, as opposed to a painful event such as Good Friday, I should think that if we had a choice, the choice would be obvious.

In my early years as a pastor, I had the problem of preaching on the same Palm Sunday text each year. Today, as a preacher, I have the problem of being overwhelmed with the problem of deciding how or what to preach on this day.

If we hear the Palm Sunday story and then hear the Passion narrative, isn't it rather anticlimactic for the preacher to say anything at all? Do these stories really need much elaboration?

If there is to be a sermon today, then, clearly, it must be to the point. And, because of the time allowed for the reading of passages from the gospel, any sermon must be brief.

Therefore, today, my point is this: Today, most pastors realize that whatever we do as Christians on Palm Sunday needs to prepare us for Holy Week in some way. But what way is the best way to prepare ourselves for Holy Week?

We will have ample opportunities through the week ahead to understand the tragedy of Holy Week. On Easter Sunday morning and in the weeks that follow Easter we will have ample opportunity to reaffirm our Easter Faith.

Today, perhaps, our scripture readings may have a chance to just preach themselves.

I am reminded of a newspaper article some years ago, about a church in Minnesota that celebrated Palm Sunday with a real live donkey. The idea of using a live donkey came form the children in the kindergarten Sunday school class. One of the children knew a man who had a donkey, so the church borrowed the donkey and got a boy from the junior high class to ride it. Most of the congregation that Palm Sunday formed a procession in the street outside the church and, carrying palm branches, and with older church members lining the road, singing and cheering, rounded the entire block in order to end up at their own church door into which they entered and continued their celebration of Palm Sunday. Although they did not do it in order to produce a public spectacle, they made quite a public witness that day. Evidently, most of the doors in front of which they processed on the way to their church
door, were the doors of un-churched people, resulting in the fact that a number of people who never heard sermons, saw a sermon in action. This sermon in action had been the children's idea.

Ironically, it seems that it was mostly children who advertised the first Palm Sunday.

Palm Sunday is Palm Sunday! It happened. That is my sermon today. Today is not Holy Thursday. Today is not Good Friday. Today is not Easter.

TODAY IS PALM SUNDAY!

As an ancient Christian antiphon has put it, which was sung as a response to the verses of Psalm 24--a psalm about Jerusalem lifting up its mighty gates that the king of glory might come in:

THE CHILDREN OF JERUSALEM
WELCOMED CHRIST THE KING.
THEY CARRIED BRANCHES
AND LOUDLY PRAISED THE LORD:
HOSANNA IN THE HIGHEST!

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Palm Sunday
Date: 16 April 2000
Homily

Today, we celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. But, in these modern liturgical times, we also know this Sunday as Passion Sunday, as we recall the events of the whole week of Holy Week. Therefore, today, we have a contrast of emotions between celebrating the joy of Jesus' glory, and the suffering of Christ on the cross.

Personally, and I have mentioned this before, I do not like this particular choice in the modern liturgical calendar. It, historically, is not part of the tradition of the Reformed churches. Even in liturgical churches, this is relatively new. Decades ago, Passion Sunday in liturgical churches was the Sunday before Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday was left alone, with its own liturgy and its own triumphant celebration. And I think that is still quite fine, thank you.

As the story of Palm Sunday indicates, there was a rather boisterous entrance scene, but, then, the day ended rather quietly. The disciples went off in one direction, and Jesus went off in another direction, and that was the end of that day, as everyone collapsed in exhaustion. I, for one, do not see the Palm Sunday event as the beginning of a steady downhill path that Jesus trod. I see it as a day unto itself, triumphant and unparalleled. As a student of history, however, I say this with caution.
Years ago, a now forgotten American historian wrote a biography about Woodrow Wilson, titled, *When The Cheering Stopped*. The story began with the events leading up to WWI, and ended with the events following WWI. When the war was over, Wilson was an international hero. There was a great spirit of optimism abroad, and people actually believed that the last war had been fought, and the world had been made safe for democracy.

On his first visit to Paris after the war, Wilson was greeted by cheering mobs. He was more popular with the French than their own heroes. The same thing was true in England and Italy. In a Vienna hospital a Red Cross worker had to tell the children that there would be no Christmas presents, because of the war and the hard times. The children didn’t believe her. They said that President Wilson was coming and they knew that everything would be all right.

The cheering lasted about a year. Then it gradually began to stop. It turned out that the political leaders in Europe were more concerned with their own agenda than with a lasting peace. At home, Woodrow Wilson ran into opposition in the United States Senate and his League of Nations was not ratified. Under the strain of it all the President’s health began to break. In the next election his party was defeated.

So it was that Woodrow Wilson, a man, who a year or two earlier had been heralded as the new world Messiah, came to the end of his days a broken and defeated man.

It is a sad story, but one that is not altogether unfamiliar.

The ultimate reward for someone who tries to translate ideals into reality, is apt to be frustration and defeat. There are some exceptions, of course, but not too many. Still, the hope that our ideals can be translated into reality abides in every human soul. Therefore, let us celebrate the cheering while it lasts, for it will stop too soon.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, bless our lives as we offer them in the name of Jesus, our Lord, who emptied himself that we might be filled; who humbled himself that we might be lifted up. May we proclaim the gospel that fills our otherwise unfulfilled lives, and meets the needs of those who need our help. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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Easter Sunday  
Date: 23 April 2000  
Meditation

HAPPY EASTER!
Christ is risen!
Christ is risen, indeed!
Alleluia!

I love Easter. I can really get into Easter. And, fortunately for me, Easter almost always gets into me.

This year, however, I could not find any Jelly Belly jellybeans. I suppose, since I live in Nashua, Iowa, that I am a victim of the Big-K problem: the only Jelly Beans that are available are the cheap jellybeans that are available at the Big-K, or Drug Town, or Hy-Vee, or Fareway, or Econo Foods.

How about you? Do you "get into" Easter?

This week I received an Easter Card that had a big purple picture of a chick bursting out of a decorated shell, underscored with the words, “Don’t just get into Easter…” I opened up the card, to read these words: “Let Easter Get Into You.”

I thought, “This is cool.” This is cool for, perhaps, everyone, but this is also cool for me. And, because, for most ministers, Easter represents the end of a lot of extra work, I hope I can take these words seriously: “Don’t just get into Easter… Let Easter get into you!”

The message of the card was simple, and direct, and as I read these words this past week, I realized that I might not have been preparing for Easter very well. Frankly, I think most of us are so slow to believe in the power of the resurrection that we prefer to make this holiday a celebration of spring? We, too easily, get confused about the real meaning of Easter.

The well-published preacher, Ben Haden, tells a story about a group of four year olds who were gathered in a Sunday school class in Chattanooga on Palm Sunday. The teacher looked at the class and asked this question: "Does anyone know what today is?" A little four-year-old girl held up her hand and said, "Yes, today is Palm Sunday."

The teacher exclaimed, "That's fantastic, that's wonderful. Now does anyone know what next Sunday is?"

The same little girl held up her hand and said, "Yes, next Sunday is Easter Sunday." Once again the teacher said, "That's fantastic. Now, does anyone know what makes next Sunday Easter?"

The same little girl responded and said, "Yes, next Sunday is Easter, because Jesus rose from the grave," and before the teacher could congratulate her, she kept on talking and said, "but if he sees his shadow, he has to go back in for six weeks."

What makes this Sunday Easter? It depends. It depends upon whether we are just sort of “getting into” Easter, or really letting Easter get into us.
HAPPY EASTER!
Christ is risen!
Christ is risen, indeed!
Alleluia!

Let us pray.

Loving God, we thank you for this Easter Day with its promises of new life and new opportunities. Use us, we pray, to love you, and to serve you, and to witness to Christ whom you have raised to life eternal. Amen.

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Easter 2
Thomas Sunday
Date: 30 April 2000
Title: “Are You Sure?”
Text: John 20:19-31

The lilies are gone.

The candy is gone.

The ham, or leg of lamb, or whatever, and all the leftovers are gone.

The relatives are gone, and we are back to our old ways and our old routines. That is what usually happens when the excitement of a holiday fades. But, the Sunday after Easter is not the same here as the Sunday after Easter has been in other churches I have served. In previous congregations, the Sunday after Easter was really HO-HUM Sunday. It is not HO-HUM Sunday here, because we use the Revised Common Lectionary readings for each Sunday.

This is the first Sunday after Easter. It is also called Thomas Sunday. Every year we read again the story of Thomas’s doubting, and this story comes right on the heels of the resurrection story, on the evening of that first day of the week.

The Apostle John tells us that the disciples were gathered together. Just for good measure, they locked the doors behind them, because they were afraid; they were afraid of what happened, afraid of what was happening at that moment, and afraid of what might happen in the future.

Isn’t it interesting that on the first day of the first week of the resurrection of our Lord, the main dynamic is fear?
John records that in this locked room, in the midst of their fears and doubts, the ten disciples are astounded when Jesus suddenly appears and stands "among them." He greets them with the phrase, "Peace be with you," and shows them his hands and his side. And the disciples are "overjoyed" when they see the Lord. The Lord sends them forth, breathes on them and gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Presumably, they go straight for Thomas and tell him, "We have seen the Lord" (v.25). They are sure of what they have seen.

But how "sure" is "sure"?

I have watched the “Who Wants To Be A Millionaire” show only once, and then, not the entire show, but I remember the contestant using one of her “life lines” (is that what they call them?) to call a friend for help. She wanted to be “really sure” that her answer was correct. She asked her friend on the telephone, “How sure are you?”

How sure are you?

I believe that is a good question for us on this Sunday after Easter. How sure are we?

The ten disciples we read about this morning were 100% sure they had seen the Risen Lord. They were “beyond a shadow of a doubt.” But Thomas was not!

So, how sure is sure?

The following is a news item from Atlanta, Georgia in April of 1999:

Last week an elderly woman left the grocery store with a shopping basket full, but as she approached her car she saw four strange men sitting in her car. She whipped out her pistol, assumed the two hands on the gun stance, and yelled at them to get out of the car with their hands up. They got out, but they ran away, escaping her wrath. The strangest thing happened next. When she got into her four-door, black Camry, the key would not fit into the ignition. Then she noticed some things in her glove compartment that did not belong in her car. She got out, and, looking around, found her own four-door, black Camry parked four spaces away. She decided she had better go to the police station and report what had happened. As she told her story to the Desk Sergeant he began to laugh, and pointed to four scared guys in the corner who had reported an attempted car jacking by a gun wielding elderly woman.

The woman was "sure" she had the right car. But being "sure" does not always mean one is right, or correct, or that she will be believed.

Three of my neighbors cut down trees during the past several weeks. Why, I am not sure. I suppose their air-conditioning bills were not high enough last year! One neighbor, in particular, knows everything. He was sure he knew which way his tree would fall. By the
The disciples were "sure" they had seen the Risen Lord, but when they ventured out of
the locked room to spread the good news, they were disheartened to find out that the
"sending forth" doesn't bear fruit immediately. Thomas, in fact, is unimpressed. He
doubts their account so much that he declares, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands
and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe
it."

Thomas doubts. He questions the truth of the story the ten bring to him, and with good
reason. Blessed Thomas! It takes another week behind closed doors and another visit by
our Lord, and an additional offer to touch his scars and feel his wounds, and another
"peace be with you," and a final command to "stop doubting and believe" before Thomas
is convinced.

How sure is sure?

Over the years, I have developed a healthy respect for Thomas and for doubting. And I
am not ashamed to admit it. I would even go so far as to say that if there were another
Beatitude, it might be, "Blessed are the doubters, for their questions help strengthen their
faith."

I believe that healthy doubts with sincere and genuine questioning have their place in our
faith journey, don’t you? I have deep questions about why some people have to suffer. I
question why some bad people get along quite well in this world, and some obviously
good people don’t. I doubt that we have seen the end of the stock market's wild ride this
past month. I doubt the sincerity of politicians.

Deep down inside me and inside you are hidden doubts about all kinds of things. Do
these questions mean we are hopelessly lost, and spiritually abandoned? No, of course
not!

Of course, when doubting becomes all we do, then it becomes something other than real,
honest doubt. Constant doubt can cripple us with cynicism. But most of the time, like
Thomas, we doubt in faith.

Does that make any sense? I think it made sense to Jesus. Notice in our scripture lesson
that when the disciples gather again the following week, Jesus does not condemn Thomas
for his earlier absence or for his questioning behavior. Jesus greets the gathered eleven
with the same words as the week before: "Peace be with you." Even doubters get his
peace!

For those of us who doubt all kinds of things on this "ho hum" Sunday, may I suggest we
use the same commands of Jesus to guide us in our seeking process that we call our
journey of faith? Rather than pretend we have no doubts, let's see what we can do with them.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We worship you, O God, aware that we are a group of people at differing stages in our journeys of faith. Our experiences of you have been shaped by diverse happenings, teachings and relationships throughout our lives. At times we move between faith and doubt, certainty and unbelief. So today, we rejoice in the word of the gospel where John declares that he has written his gospel to confirm and strengthen our belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in believing, we might have life in his name. We worship you, O God, with praise and thanksgiving for that gift of life made possible through Jesus' death and resurrection. Strengthen and confirm our belief in Jesus in this time of worship here today. May we know the blessings of his peace within us and the life-giving breath of his Spirit upon us. We offer this prayer and our worship in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Easter 3  
Date: 13 April 1997  
Title: "What Brings Faith?"  

What brings faith?

This morning, our gospel lesson seems to be an echo of last week’s lesson. The setting is the same. The characters are the same, but the unfolding of the story is different, and therefore the message, although similar, varies from the story of the doubting Thomas.

The main character is the same: Jesus. "Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'" The disciples think they are seeing a ghost, so Jesus does something that he had done with his disciples many times--Jesus eats with them. Jesus eats a piece of fish to prove that he is not a ghost--ghosts don't eat. "Ghosts don't have flesh and bones," he says to them.

"Look at my hands." "Look at my feet." "It is I." "Let's party."

There are many stories about Jesus eating with his disciples. This is just one more story about the friendship Jesus enjoyed when he shared a meal with his friends. But Jesus does more than eat and party with his friends.

Over the years I have learned some sign language, only to forget it, because I don't know anyone with whom I can practice it. But one sign I remember. It is the sign for the name of Christ.
The forefinger of the right hand is touched to the left palm, and then the forefinger of the left hand is touched to the right hand. Nail-pierced hands AND a touching finger are the symbols of a meeting with the risen Christ. Let's do this sign together: with your right forefinger, touch the center of your left palm, and then with your left forefinger touch your right palm.

Look. Listen. Touch. We are not dealing with a ghost this morning.

After the first Easter, the enemies of Jesus were exultant. The friends of Jesus were in despair; they were hopeless. Their confidence was shattered. The tomb was empty. Did someone steal the body?

This morning's lesson, as it echoes the lesson of last week, reminds us that it took a while for all the disciples to believe, and the gospel writers take time to communicate the delay in their believing.

The disciples needed proof. "You want proof," asks Jesus, "here's your proof!"

(sign)

Why do we have these stories in the gospel accounts of the events after Easter? These stories are in the gospels, obviously, for a number of reasons. All of them come from a reverence for God. Even last week's story about the doubting disciple named Thomas reminds us that questioning is good for our faith. Doubting honestly is healthy for our faith. Faith should never answer questions prematurely. Faith needs to take time to reach beyond understandings and ask honest questions.

The disciples were "startled and frightened." They thought they saw a ghost. The risen Christ calmed their fears, saying, "Peace be with you." And Christ removed their doubts, saying, "Look at my hands and my feet." And he did something that he had done with them many times before; he ate with them.

We live in a world of mystery. What then brings us faith? Well, the question is not so much WHAT brings us faith as WHO BRINGS US FAITH? This story is about Jesus the Christ who brings us faith, who greets us with his peace, who blesses us with his presence, and who wants us to enjoy his company.

Let us pray.

Eternal God, may the living spirit of Christ be in our experience and may Christ's victory be a present triumph in our souls. Amen.
Today we celebrate Jesus the Good Shepherd, and we also celebrate Mother's Day. For me, there is an interesting coming together of images on this day. Both images represent caring. Both represent persons who are anxious for us to follow their lead. Both images work in us to create an enduring spiritual agenda.

How then do we honor both? How do we give honor where honor is due?

There are many female images of God in the Bible, all of which portray a caring and nurturing God. The Good Shepherd image is more like the female images than the masculine images of God. Through the ages a number of church scholars have picked up on this. One example is Anselm of Canterbury, who wrote a famous prayer: “Jesus, as mother you gather your people to you; you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.” Perhaps Anselm was reflecting on an image of God found in the Psalms—of a hen, gathering her chicks under her wings?

The maternal action, or behavior, of gathering people together and being gentle with them recalls the action and behavior of the Good Shepherd, bringing the sheep together. The shepherd, like a good mother, embraces his own sheep as well as sheep of other folds, speaking to them in a voice that they recognize and trust. The maternal image of Jesus also contains within it the protective, sacrificial role of the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

These images help us to take what we know of love, protection and sacrifice in our daily life, and make life-giving connections and insights to our spiritual life. The images we have of Jesus and God are often born in the creative, spiritual intersection between the care we experience from our parents, both mothers and fathers, and our innate desire for meaning and connection with something greater and more powerful than ourselves, namely, God. The desire to know our parents, to have that connection with them, is vividly portrayed in stories we read of the search of some grown children, raised by adoptive parents, who later seek their parents, especially their birth mothers.

There are two sides to the issue of motherhood. When I think of my own mother, I can see a sort of divine archetype of a good shepherd. I remember her efforts to raise two rascally boys, to create a home of love, learning, and culture, and, at the same time, to pursue a career, and, in her “spare time” volunteer to do a number of things at our church and in our community. All these activities of hers were life giving, and are the basis for the gratitude I feel towards her on Mother’s Day, and every day.

Surely, coming to terms with our lives and with the people in our lives in such ways, is near the heart of our spiritual journey as mature Christians. Knowing who we are and where we come from is what we celebrate today.
It is serendipitous how the Apostle John speaks directly to these issues of belonging on this Mother's Day and Good Shepherd Sunday: "Beloved, we are God's children now." Mothers, sons, and daughters: we all are equally embraced in this new identity. By honoring our mothers and all those who "mothered" us, we honor Christ as well; who taught us that God loves us like a loving parent.

Who are the people who have mothered you, and given you a sense of being loved, and protected you, and nurtured you?

PRAYER

Gracious God, we know love because you made it eternally visible in the person of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. He revealed the depth of that love by laying down his life for us. We pray that our gratitude for such undeserved gifts may be demonstrated through our sacrificial love and compassionate care for others, and in the way we care for this world in which we live. Jesus showed us that love is not confined to words alone, nor is it ever an abstract quality. Love is at all times a heart-centered activity. Stir such a love in our hearts, we pray, so that all we do may be pleasing to you and be the very best evidence of our identity as people who call ourselves Christian. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Easter 5
Date: 21 May 2000
Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Easter
Text: Acts 8:26-40

Some of you know that my first career was in Civil Engineering. Even while I studied music, I continued to work as a land surveyor every summer. One summer, my surveying party was assigned the task of surveying a vast tract of land in southeastern New York State. We started out well, following the description of the land in a deed: Begin at the Geodetic survey marker along the so-and-so railroad at so-and-so street in Stony Point, New York. Proceed 200-sum-odd chains and so many links north. (We converted the chains and links into feet and inches.) Proceed 500-sum-odd chains and so many links west. Proceed south 300-sum-odd chains and so many links to the wide stonewall.

Everything had been rather easy and enjoyable so far, but the wide stonewall was obvious, and it was completely covered with poison ivy. The next instructions stopped us dead in our tracks: “Proceed along the center of the wall until you reach the great oak tree where John killed the big bear.”

We had gone 200 north. We had gone 500 west. We had gone 300 south. Obviously, we had also to go east and north and then east again. We walked along the poison ivy
covered stonewall for a major part of the afternoon. There were no great trees or even the remains of a great tree. So, we went back to the office for a better kind of guidance. We, obviously, needed better information, and more information.

Today’s lesson from the Book of Acts tells us something about a better kind of guidance, but the story starts rather awkwardly. The angel says to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south."

Philip replies, "South, but that's the road leading to the wilderness."

Angel: "Go to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

Philip: "To Gaza? But there's nothing there."

The angel tells Philip to go to a certain place in the wilderness. He goes there. When he gets there he meets a high official of the Queen of Ethiopia who was going from Jerusalem to Gaza in his chariot, and the man was reading from the Book of Isaiah, which he picked up in the Jerusalem Wal-Mart on the best sellers shelf.

The angel says to Philip, "Go over to his chariot and try to hitch a ride."

Philip runs up to the chariot and jumps on. He hears the man reading a passage from a scroll of Isaiah. Philip asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

The Ethiopian replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

We know that Philip was Greek, because of his name. The name, Philip, comes from PHILOS, the word for love, and HIPPOS, which is the Greek word for horse. Philip’s name describes him as a lover of horses. So, just for kicks, let’s give Phil a southwestern, cowboy accent and imagine him greeting the stranger as if Phil were John Wayne: "So do ya understand that there book, Pilgrim?"

There is a great deal in the Bible that is difficult to understand. That is O.K., for throughout the history of the Great Book, it was never meant to be read alone. The Bible has always been a community book. It was written in and for a community of faith. Its words usually don’t make any sense at all beyond its community of faith. That is why new translations are constantly needed as the community of faith grows up, and I don’t mean commercial translations; I mean translations by the scholars of the ecumenical Christian community.

The Ethiopian was greatly interested in what he was reading, but he understood nothing. He asks Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"

Philip then teaches the Ethiopian about Jesus, the Messiah, who welcomed and accepted all who were excluded: tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, women, the poor, children and
thieves. Philip explained that Jesus died on a cross, was raised to new life, and is now working throughout the world to bring all people together before God. Philip continued his teaching, going one step further to offer a better kind of guidance, and he told the Ethiopian that the Ethiopian needed to understand the scriptures; he needed to understand the relationship of faith and suffering; he needed to understand that God accepts, welcomes, and treasures all people; he needed to understand that there are no outcasts in the kingdom of God.

Then the two passed a pool of water. The Ethiopian declared, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"


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Easter 7
Homily
Text: John 17: 11-19

In today’s gospel lesson, we learn that Jesus prayed for his disciples. Surely, that is the least he could have done. They needed all the help they could get, but does prayer really help? When do we pray, and why? What reminds us to pray?

Prayer is supposed to have some kind of impact. John Pilch, in his book, The Cultural World of Jesus, reminds us that prayer is an act of communication “intended to have an impact on a person perceived as being in control of life in order to obtain results from that person.” He goes on to say that not all prayer in the Bible is religious prayer. Remember, if you will, Jesus’ mother’s comment at the wedding in Cana: “Son, they ran out of wine.” That was not a religious prayer. It may have been an act of communication to influence Jesus on the couple’s behalf, but it was not a religious prayer.

We make prayers of this kind all day long. "Mom, there isn't any peanut butter left," correctly identifies who is in control of life and wants the person in control to find a way to provide more peanut butter, but that is not a religious prayer. The prayer in today’s gospel is different, because it is addressed to God and it is intended to obtain specific results.

There are many expressive forms of prayer. Each can remind us to pray. Surely, one of the most expressive forms of prayer is a prayer of thanks that is not intended to obtain specific results. Prayers of praise and joy are also expressive forms of prayer.

How expressive are we in prayer? How thankful are we? Could anyone tell that we are thankful by the way we pray? When do you give thanks? Have you ever thought of giving thanks for the aroma of a freshly brewed cup of coffee in the early morning, perhaps before the sun rises, or a prayer of thanks for the brightly lit morning sky, or for a
child’s laughter or smile, or for the healing of a sick friend or relative, or for the love we have experienced in our families, or for an awareness of God’s presence in our lives?

What, exactly, reminds you to pray?

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, source of all creation, all love, all true joy, accept, we pray, our prayers and all the outward signs of our profound and continuing thankfulness for all of life. Bless those who will benefit from our prayers, and keep each of us ever thankful for all the blessings of joy and challenge that come our way. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, we give thanks and praise for Jesus’ preparedness to show us your true nature and your true character. In his words we hear the resonance of your voice, and in his deeds we see the imprint of your hands. We give thanks that your Son’s presence disclosed a new reality at work in the world--the reality of your kingdom, O God, where that which is broken is mended, where the afflicted are relieved, where the bound are set free and where the excluded are included. We pray that our worship here today will enable us to catch a glimpse of your kingdom, to hear the resonance of your voice, to know the imprint of your hand on our lives and to experience the gift of your Spirit within us. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Loving God, we praise you for blessing and protecting our lives through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. We offer these gifts as signs of our gratitude and our commitment to live lives shaped by holiness and love. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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A Sermon for the Sunday of Memorial Day Weekend
Date: 28 May 2000
Text: John 15:9-17 (Year B, Easter 6)

“A man is not dead until he is forgotten.” I do not recall of the origin of the saying, but it is fitting for the Memorial Day weekend.

A person is not dead, until that person is forgotten.

As people of faith, we are called to remembrance again and again. Every time we celebrate Holy Communion we are reminded that we celebrate in remembrance of Christ. This is very important for Christians, because if we fail to remember Christ in the active present on a regular basis, then Christ is truly dead, and Christ has not been raised.
On Memorial Day we are reminded of the importance of remembering.

This weekend always reminds me of a family tradition. There were many traditions on both sides of my family when I was young that were celebrated during each and every season. The one that marked the beginning of the summer season was on Memorial Day weekend with a trip to my maternal grandmother’s family gravesite in Port Jervis, New York.

Very old cemeteries out east were not always well kept like they are now. The owners of large family plots needed to care for them on a regular basis. Before we decorated the graves with cut flowers, while sharing stories about each person at rest there, we cleaned off the plot, raked leaves, trimmed the shrubs, trimmed dead limbs from the ancient pines that shaded the plot, and straightened leaning or twisted stones. Because a number of people from the Washer family usually turned out for this event, some of the men also usually spent some time cleaning up the Civil War area of the cemetery. (We need to remember that Memorial Day was originally a day to remember those who gave their lives during the Civil War. The other Veterans have their own day, and it is called Veterans Day.) My great-great-grandfather who died in the Civil War was buried in the family plot, but many Civil War dead from the area had no one to remember them, and they were buried together in a remote corner of the cemetery. The men in the Washer family had been remembering those fallen soldiers for a number of years. They had once discovered that a brush dump near a wooded area covered a number of long-forgotten and abandoned graves. As they cleared away some of the debris, they discovered a large area filled with the small stone markers of those who died in the Civil War.

The cemetery in Port Jervis was a scenic triangular piece of land at the confluence of the Delaware and Neversink rivers. Out on the rocky point where the waters met was a beautiful sandy beach. At the end of the day we would build a cooking fire out on the point, grill up a feast and enjoy a picnic supper before we headed home.

Truly, with the distance that many family members traveled, the Memorial Weekend adventure was a pilgrimage of remembrance. We remembered those who rested in the family plot, we met other families who did the same thing, and we remembered the importance of remembering together, as a family, in the active present.

I wonder who does the remembering there now? Someday I would like to remember there again. How big are the great pines now? Are the stones still in place? Is the great Washer Family obelisk still perpendicular? Are the red peonies still blooming? I know that my mother gets there once in a great while, but who else is remembering? Do families still have Memorial Weekend picnics out on the point? Does anyone still tend to the Civil War graves?

The annual trip to Port Jervis was not a “we must do this and that” thing or even a “we always do this or that” thing. It was a remembrance thing. It was not a matter of fulfilling someone else’s expectations; it was a matter of learning the joy of serving through
remembrance, which is a far more powerful experience than just meeting other people’s expectations.

The gospel lesson this morning reminds us of this. There are some instructions here, yes, but they are based on love, not on duty or expectation. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you,” says Jesus. “Now remain in my love.” Remain, abide, obey, love, do, go and bear much fruit. These instructions cover us like rain drops in a sudden shower. All of them flow from the greatest commandment: “Love each other.”

The trouble is, though, that we have our most difficulty in life with the "heart and soul" of things. On Memorial Day we remember, first of all, those men and women from our country who gave their lives in the defense of freedom. We owe them a debt of gratitude, but is it not it a shame that they had to be called to defend us, for love's sake, through warfare? Is it not sad that from our nation's beginnings, and every country's origin for that matter, men and women have failed to follow the greatest command: "Love each other." We are proud of our fallen heroes and their sacrifices, but we are also convicted that the way of war is not the way of love.

War is not the way of love in nations, in communities, in schools, in homes, or anywhere else. And yet, every time we turn on the news, we are reminded that even in these times of economic prosperity, it is so sad to be continually reminded that in terms of “heart and soul” matters, we are so woefully poor. Too often, the command, “love each other,” rings hollow.

Why is this? I think some of the causes are obvious: selfishness, envy, impatience, and increasing intolerance demonstrated by such human behavior as road rage.

Years ago, not here in Northern Iowa, I officiated at a funeral followed by a graveside service quite a distance from the church. I usually ride in the hearse or the lead car in a funeral procession, but I drove my own car that day so that I could return from the cemetery on my own. The procession of cars was very long as we made our way from the church to the cemetery on one of Iowa's endless, straight, two-lane blacktops. We were driving at a reasonable speed and not poking along at all, but some guy who became stuck behind the procession got impatient and pulled out into the other lane to pass the entire procession. I saw him flying up the other lane in my rearview mirror, and I could hear his motor roaring as he reached incredible speed.

As you might imagine, however, even his incredible speed and stupidity were not sufficient to allow him to pass the entire procession before a semi appeared on the horizon. He slowed down, blasted his horn, and without using his turn signal pulled right in front of me.

Even ministers can get a little hot under the collar, even if the collar is a clerical collar, so I returned a horn blast, to which he responded with an obscene gesture. When the truck cleared, the guy floored it again and screeched out into the other lane to pass the rest of
us. When I remember that day, I remember thinking, “Man, someday, perhaps sooner than you think, you’re going to be in one of these processions.”

There are things we do “for love’s sake.” When we forget that, we put our lives in jeopardy.

Why do we sometimes fail to love one another? Because we forget! We forget to put Christ’s words into action in our lives. We forget to think about others and their well-being. We forget the painful lessons of the past. We forget the mistakes we have made. Or, like many politicians, we revise our past, and rework it into something more palatable. Instead of admitting our shortcomings, we conveniently forget the less desirable parts of our growing up, or cover them up. In forgetting what the past can teach us, however, we condemn ourselves to repeating behavior that causes all kinds of damage to others and ourselves.

There is more. We also dare not forget the good times. My story about my youthful memories of the Port Jervis cemetery is a simple reminder to me to remember the lessons of my elders, to rekindle the spirit of what it means to remember together, and to renew my hopes and dreams by remembering my forebears and their precious memories.

Hopefully, when we decorate the graves this weekend, we all will remember the giving of those whom we honor, and we will also remember the rich tradition of goodness that has flowed on to us from them and the enriching effect it has had upon us.

Remembering is always good. And remembering to remember is always a blessing.

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Trinity Sunday
Date: 18 June 2000

Trinity Sunday is unique. Whereas all other church celebrations denote events in the history of the Christian faith, this Sunday denotes a doctrine rather than an event. Why? Why not! Surely we are here today because of our realization of the blessings derived from the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We know the language when we talk about the Trinity, but do we know what it means?

Imagine two groups of children on a field trip walking through Iowa woodland. One group is from Riceville or Nashua, and the other is from a large metropolitan area, say, Chicago. As they make their way through a large woods of maples, elms, cedars, pines and oaks, which group will be more observant?

On first thought, you might suspect that the children from the city would be more observant since their experience would be new and unfamiliar to them. After all, forests
are rarely encountered within cities like Chicago. (We might also admit at this point that there are no major forests in Iowa.) Yet, when it would come to noticing specific items in the woods, my money would be on the children from our communities. Why? Because they live in an environment where certain terms are a part of their everyday experience, and this alone would make them more aware of certain things they would encounter on their hike through a woods. Scholars refer to this as a linguistic universe. In other words, the visiting children live in a world of language just as we do. And because certain words exist in their language, certain objects exist in their world.

For instance, a seven-year-old whose father is interested in Iowa wildlife will readily recognize a tree or sapling where a buck has caused damage to the bark. That child will point this out to a classmate and say, “Look, there's buck rub!” The child from the city, without a relative who spends time in the country, would most likely walk by the buck rub without noticing it.

Another child, whose grandmother collects hickory nuts for use in baking will likewise notice the distinctive appearance of the hickory trees because, in her world of language, she has heard the name of that tree: Shagbark Hickory. Without that name, the presence of hickory trees, even with their highly distinctive bark, might go unnoticed.

Some writers suggest that the same applies to our experience of God. The less we speak about God, the less we notice God. Furthermore, without the distinctive name of the Holy Trinity, not only would we not notice God, we would also fail to notice distinctive qualities of God.

The story about the children in the woods, therefore, can help us realize that the way we speak about God will affect how and where we recognize the presence of God in our world. That is the good news. There is also some bad news concerning the aforementioned human behavior. It can also imply, in an Alice-in-Wonderland sort of way, that whatever we name as God will mean God and we can choose whatever names we wish for God.

But sometimes names are given, not chosen. Many of you here know that some German family names originally denoted, not a family of origin, but a place of origin. That is true of many family names. My family name, Mowbray, has been a family name in England since the eleventh century. It is, however, derived from a Norman name, de Montbrai, which denoted a place of origin in northern France.

It may seem a bit odd to many of us today, but we continue to have a reflection of this in rural areas like ours. We have our own way of conveying a sense of location through the names we attach to people or things. A farm will often be referred to as, let's say, the Mowbray place, long after its ownership has passed to other families.

Just this past week, Mary and I stopped to chat with a retired couple from the other side of town, and the woman’s husband declared that he didn’t think he had ever met us. His
wife assured him that he had met us. “You know the Mowbrays,” she said, “they live in the Chenoweth house on Lexington.”

Names not only help us recognize the existence of certain things in our world (like the hickory trees in the woods), they can also denote a type of location.

Today we honor the Holy Trinity, by name. This not only helps us recognize God's presence, but also gives us a sense of location as we say, in relation to God the Father, "Look, here is God's presence in the marvels of Creation!" And in relation to our knowledge of God’s Son, “Wow, here is God's presence in the experience of redemption!” And in relation to the presence of God in our hearts and in our minds and in our Church, "Look at God’s Spirit at work in the experience of love!"

These are the places, in a sense, from which the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit originate.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord God, Creator of all the wonders that make up this world, forgive us for treating our part of the world as a commodity to be used rather than a gift to be cherished. Forgive our failure to care for and protect this lovely land, its oceans, rivers and lakes, and the air that we breathe each day.

God, our Redeemer, forgive us when we fail to live out Jesus' commandment to love one another as he loves us. Forgive us when we betray the truth of the gospel through our lack of integrity and our abuse of ethical and moral principles.

God, Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giving Spirit, fill us anew with your creative power that we may be reborn in your image, glorifying you in and through who we are and what we do and say in Jesus' name. Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Holy God, we offer these gifts and our lives in thankfulness for all you have done and are doing in our lives. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

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Proper 5  
Date: 08 June 1997  
Title: “Fresh Perceptions”  
Text: Mark 3:20-35
Has anyone ever thought that you were mad? And I don't mean angry, I mean nuts, crazy, wacky? Well, if you have not had that privilege and distinct honor, perhaps you have not cut sharply and deeply enough to make a lasting impression on other people.

In many ways, "he is mad" has been an ultimate tribute in Christian history to those who served not two masters, but One. The Apostle Paul seems to have the Distinguished Service Medal in this department. Do you recall in the book of Acts, where Festus yells out, "Paul, you're crazy!" And some Christians have had that impression of preachers ever since.

Christian history is full of whackos. Francis of Assisi preached to the birds, and since that time preaching has often been for the birds. Francis talked to animals. His colleagues thought he was mad. One Christmas Eve, instead of preparing for the high mass, he gathered animals in an old shed, with people dressed as shepherds, and a father and a mother, and a little baby lying in a manger, to celebrate the humanity of Jesus. No one had ever done that before on Christmas Eve. Francis was nuts. Since then, however, Christmas has hardly seemed authentic without a crèche scene.

There is so much I would like to deal with in each of the lessons this morning, especially the gospel. In the gospel alone, we have the madness of Jesus. We have the vast subject of good and evil with the intense question, how can one accomplish good ends by evil means. We have the house divided against itself. And we have one of the most difficult problems to deal with--the words, "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin."

Oh, Lord, is there such a thing as an unforgivable sin?

And then there is the whole matter of Jesus’ family, and whom he considers to really be his mother, and brother and sister.

Where are we going to start and where will we end with this lesson? That was a question I asked myself all week.

One thing I always enjoy doing with a scripture passage is to look at the literature. In this passage, Mark uses a literary technique known as intercalation. To put it very simply, the passage is a sandwich. Mark starts one story, and then tells another story before completing the original story. Arranged this way, the two stories complement and comment upon each other achieving more force than each story could if it had been told separately or in tandem.

So, let us consider the sandwich. Between the slices of bread is a bunch of stuff, but we begin with the concern of Jesus’ family about his behavior. We then move through a bunch of false accusations to a new understanding of family--a family of God. We know that Jesus was very devoted to his natural family. But true family affection, says Jesus, should be an incentive and support of service in a larger realm, and not a substitute for it. A family should be a harbor from which a ship leaves to sail the seas, not a dock where it
ties up and rots. God's compelling priorities demand a wider perception of family. The great values of home, of love, and of community must be carried out into a larger, complete circle. And we could conclude with that insight right here.

I don't think we need to dwell on the particulars of this story. For one thing, there are too many to deal with in one sermon. So, let's make a different approach.

All of the lessons today, deal with one underlying theme: the common concern about what it means to be prepared for God's ongoing action in the world and how to be ready to encounter change as God's gift. In the early nineteenth century, Cardinal Newman wrote, "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

These words are good for us this morning, because they do not celebrate change for the sake of change, but, rather, they celebrate the process of development, and growth, and evolution that is at the heart of God's dealing with the universe.

This morning we are not dealing with a doctrine of inevitable progress. Instead, we are affirming our faith in a God whose intentions are often radically changed. God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

The radical new teachings of Jesus attracted great attention, and not everyone was favorably impressed. Rumor had it that he was mad. And we may assume that it was because of the rumor that Jesus' family went after him, and not because they personally thought he was nuts. His family, like many who encountered Jesus, were ready to take charge of him, totally unaware that he just might be revealing to them the very will of God for their own lives.

This story might come as a sobering reminder to persons who take comfort in a close relationship with Jesus, that our past associations with Jesus are not a guarantee of a proper present performance in relation to God's will.

Our message this morning is precisely this--that we, as Christians, must always be ready to follow in startling new directions as disciples of our Lord, and we must never assume that our past experiences and our knowledge mean that we have a correct understanding of new revelations of God's will.

With this radical understanding, which caused people to think that Jesus was mad, some favorite Christian questions, such as "Have you been saved," and "Have you been born again," go right out the window. They, as they deal only with the past, are totally irrelevant to the startling new directions we are to follow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Wow, doesn't that sound radical!

When we look at this sandwich, however, the message is clear. When Christians become at home with their religious assumptions, when they become convinced that they know who God is and what God is all about in this world, they face the danger of being
incapable of fresh perceptions of God's new directions in their midst. This has happened in many a congregation, and it is always very sad.

Sick religion is worse than no religion at all. The final scene in our gospel lesson clarifies the total situation. Our past experiences, our past associations, our knowledge, are not the basis for our relationship to God; rather, we are aligned with God as we respond presently to God's work in the here-and-now.

Charles Wesley captured this truth in one of his hymns:

Behold the servant of the Lord!
I wait thy guiding eye to feel,
To hear and keep thy every word,
To prove and do thy perfect will,
Joyful from my own works to cease,
Glad to fulfill all righteousness.

Me if thy grace vouchsafe to use,
Meanest of all they creatures, me,
The deed, the time, the manner choose;
Let all my fruit be found of thee;
Let all my works in thee be wrought,
By thee to full perfection brought.

And the third verse is my favorite:

My every weak though good design
O'errule or change, as seems thee meet;
Jesus, let all my work be thine!
Thy work, O Lord, is all complete,
And pleasing in thy Father's sight;
Thou only hast done all things right.
Here then to thee thine own I leave;
Mould as thou wilt thy passive clay;
But let me all thy stamp receive,
But let me all thy words obey,
Serve with a single heart and eye,
And to thy glory live and die.

AMEN.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

SAMUEL 8:1-11, 16-20: The first lesson is a story of Israel's request for a king. It comes from a period that marks the transition from tribal Israel to the pragmatic age of kings.
The central message is that the practical exercise of power in our everyday communities is always less than ideal, and, therefore, must be critically evaluated.

Psalm 138 is a thanksgiving psalm. The personal language of trust throughout the psalm provides a safeguard against the danger of giving up our ideals for pragmatic solutions to problems.

II. CORINTHIANS 4:13-5:1: In the second lesson, the Apostle Paul is replying to opponents of his work, by expressing his confidence in the character of his work and stating the content of his message.

MARK 3:20-35: In the gospel lesson, Jesus comes under fire from critics of his ministry. As in the second lesson, the issue at the heart of the controversy is the nature and origin of spiritual power. Paul and Mark deal with the issue differently, but the main theme in both lessons is the declaration that divine power is really God's own power.

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Proper 6  
Date: 15 June 1997  
Title: “What’s Happening”  
Text: Mark 4:26-34

This morning, the gospel lesson presents two wonderful, and well-known parables. "This is what the kingdom of God is like," said Jesus.

What is the kingdom of God? Where is it and what is it?

These are questions people ask today, and are similar to the questions people asked in Jesus’ day. When people asked Jesus such questions, however, he told them they were asking the wrong questions, and he did not answer them. He seems to deliberately avoid speaking directly about the kingdom and, instead, tells a story. So, what is his point?

In the first parable about the seed growing mysteriously, is the story about the seed, or about the farmer, or about the land? Is it about all of these elements? Is the story a mysterious allegory bidding us to think, oh, the seed must represent this, and the farmer represents this and the land represents this?

What is happening here? Obviously, when Jesus told a parable, he deliberately avoided speaking directly about the kingdom of God, so that his listeners could avoid asking stupid questions and avoid complicated explanations about the gracious and divine accomplishments of God.

So, what IS happening in this parable? The kingdom of God is happening!
What are the signs of the kingdom of God? The signs are intuitively obvious! Just, look! Just, look at the magnificent work of God around you! Get caught up in the wonderful work of God. Just open your eyes, and look.

The second parable is equally enticing. It is equally difficult or equally simple, as the case may be. The mustard seed is certainly NOT the smallest seed on earth, although ancient Jews referred to it as such for the sake of storytelling. And, the mustard bush is not very large.

Again, Jesus avoids explanation, and he avoids speaking directly about the kingdom, because this is not a botany lesson, and this is not a moral lesson. So, just consider A (one) seed, perhaps. Just look at it. Watch it sprout and grow. Just look and consider the wonderful work of God. Can you see God's hand at work? You really don't have to look much farther then your garden.

What's happening? Just look, and watch and listen. God is continually doing things other than what we would likely do if we were God.

For many of us, life seems to be just one thing after another. Or, as someone once said, "life is what happens to us while we are making other plans." Let's avoid this trap, says Jesus. Forget the details. Forget the explanations. You want to know what's happening? The kingdom of God is happening, and it is happening all around you if you will just get caught up in it. The signs are very clear. And you can find them wherever you look.

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Proper 7  
Date: 22 June 1997  
Title: “Extraordinary Power”  
Text: Mark 4:35-41

The common theme that unites all the lessons today is the power of God. How do you think about the power of God? What do you think about when you think about the power of God?

Surely, during the past two weeks most of us have had an opportunity or two to reflect upon the power of nature. Often the power of God is compared to the power of nature. During the late spring in Iowa, Mother Nature and Father God often seem to get back together after a separation of some months.

Late last Friday night, a huge storm system engulfed our community. It seemed to come from the northwest, but then proceeded to surround us—lightning flashed from every direction. The thunder rolled with a continuous roar, sometimes shaking everything in the house. Of course, we turned on the weather radio, and surfed through the TV channels. We learned that we had digressed from watch to warning. The storm lasted for nearly two
hours. And then, suddenly, it was gone, and there was the peace and calm that one can enjoy only after a storm.

Some people are alarmed at the reactions Jesus had to happenings in the natural world. Jesus often reacted to the human world with great alarm, and with emotions that sometimes seemed out of control. To the happenings in the natural world, however, "Peace! Be still!" is a typical example. After Jesus said these words, there was a great calm.

Consider, if you will, the scene. Jesus was out in a boat with career fisherman, on the Sea of Galilee. The members of the crew were experienced boat folk. Jesus was the landlubber. Jesus had asked the fishermen to take him to the other side of the sea, which is not much larger than what we would call a large lake.

A storm came up. Storms happen, but let’s consider the setting.

Mary and Allen and I often sail on Clear Lake. Clear lake is rather high in elevation, and surrounded by low, rolling hills, therefore if the weather changes, we can see it. When I was a child, however, I often sailed on a New England lake located in a valley between high mountains. Storms could arrive there without early detection, which would have been the case on the Sea of Galilee.

There is another aspect concerning this story that might come to our attention. I have heard a number of sermons based on this gospel text. Nearly all of them contained comments concerning the fact that Jesus was asleep in the boat during the storm. How could he sleep during a storm?

From my own experiences as a sailor, the best thing one can do to avoid seasickness during a storm is to go down to the lowest part of the center of the boat and lie down.

And what about Jesus’ words? “Peace! Be calm!” could be a command, or a reaction. After all, most commands are no more than reactions. And there are, I am certain, many times when each of us would probably like to issue such a command to the world around us. “Peace! Be calm!”

Consider, if you will, the world around us. Of all the so-called conveniences in your home, how many of them create quiet and calm? The TV, the stereo, are created for exactly the opposite. Every cooking device has an alarm. Then there is the violent racket of the blender, or the food processor, or the mixer. We have no devices in our bedrooms to help us sleep, only inventions to wake us with noise. Do any of you know of a single invention that has been created during your lifetime to create quiet and calm?

Most of the crises we face in life are not ultimate crises. Actually, we, all of us face only one ultimate crisis. Therefore, during most of our lives the words “Peace! Be calm!” are words that can bring us real hope.
The forces of nature are awesome, but they bring us far more good than evil. So, think, if you will, once more about the panic of the disciples. They were the experienced fishermen. Jesus was the landlubber.

"Peace, Be still." Were these words addressed to the storm or were these words addressed to the fishermen who had lost faith in their own skills?

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Proper 7  
Date: 25 June 2000  
Title: “The Day Life Becomes A Storm”  
Text: Mark 4:35-41

Each day has it's own unique moment that marks that day, but, beyond this truth, and throughout our lives, certain days stand out from all the others. They are special days when something happens that has a lasting influence or profound impact upon us. They are days of joy and excitement. They are days of wonder and adventure. They are days of disappointment and sorrow. And they can be days when we loose control of our lives to the point that life itself is threatened.

During my life, there have been many such days. From childhood I yet treasure many days of discovery.

Perhaps one of my earliest discoveries that helped me gain some control in my life was the day Clyde Wickham Gracen the Third moved to town. We were both five years old, in first grade, and much smaller than the rest of the kids who were as much as a year older and a year bigger than we were. The real time of terror was recess after lunch when the older kids bullied all the first graders. In my case, I was small enough to be bullied by my own classmates.

Then along came Clyde Wickham Gracen the Third, Wicky for short. We became instant friends, and without going into detail let me just say that by the end of recess that day, we were inseparable as playground buddies who looked out for each other. The bigger kids learned very quickly to leave us alone.

We have days of discovery. We also have days of triumph.

For decades, one of a teenager’s rites of passage, and a major step into adulthood, is getting a driver’s license. In New Jersey, where I grew up, one had to be seventeen to drive. Now, if you refer to my last illustration, you might quickly realize that I was not able to drive until the second semester of my senior year in high school. That was painful. All my friends had more control over their lives than I did. Most of them drove to the Junior Prom. Well, at least I got to drive to my Senior Prom.
It seemed that I had to wait forever to turn seventeen. Then, my parents would not let me drive alone until I had completed Driver’s Education, Prom Night being the one exception.

Eventually, and at long last I was liberated.

There are also days of romance. Everyday we meet new people. Some enter are lives for a brief moment. We learn their names, but then, before the relationship can grow, someone leaves to move to another town, or to go to a different school or college, or a new job. Other people enter our world and the relationship grows: sometimes very slowly, other times quite quickly. We enjoy common interests. We spend time together and we become good friends. But then there develops a relationship that goes beyond even friendship, when two lives step toward becoming one.

I met Mary at the first choir rehearsal I conducted at the NATO Base chapel in Iceland. Our relationship grew. I knew when my tour of duty would be over, and the day came when our relationship needed to either move to a deeper level or fade into a sad goodbye, so I asked her, "Mary, I’ve been accepted at the seminary of my choice, and I am leaving Iceland a few months early in order to begin the fall semester. I don’t want to leave Iceland without you. Will you marry me?"

She replied with an immediate “Yes!” But I know her exclamation was not easy, because it meant leaving her well-established career as a teacher in overseas schools.

There have been days when life became a discovery. There have been days when life became a triumph. And there have been days when life became a romantic moment. These are happy days and days that have had a lasting impact upon my life.

There are also other days that are more difficult to remember. They have occurred with striking similarity to the other days. They have come unexpectedly. They have come during the regular routine of life, but they brought tragedy and turmoil.

How many of us here this morning have gone to a physician with a minor ailment only to have the physician discover a far more serious health problem?

Life has its surprise storms for which we are never really prepared.

Why God? How could this happen? Why did this happen now?

I normally do not like surprises, unless, of course, it is the unanticipated generosity of a relative or friend. I appreciate knowing what will happen from day to day so that I can plan accordingly. The feeling of control provides me with a certain level of comfort and security. I chart my daily activities carefully but, sometimes, despite all my efforts, I am unable to foresee the coming of a storm. So it was with Jesus and his disciples.
Mark writes, "That day when evening came…." His words convey the image that the day began just like any other day. There was nothing to distinguish that day from any other day. There was also no indication on the horizon that a storm was brewing. Mountains surround the Sea of Galilee. Distant storms can be concealed from view and can strike with sudden and violent force, but there were no signs that one was forming.

I can remember sailing on Lake Dunmore in Vermont. My family spent part of every summer there and one of my favorite activities was sailing. The lake is in a long valley surrounded by two ranges of the Green Mountains. Storms easily surprised us. My brother and I and other sailing companions were often caught by a surprise storm and had to follow the seafarer’s advice — “Any port in a storm!,” and head for the nearest dock on the lee shore, secure the boat and seek shelter. Quite a few cabin owners met us under those circumstances during those years. We were experienced sailors, but we also knew our limits and the limits of our boat and we knew better than to take any chances with lightning.

The storms of life can overwhelm anyone.

When the disciples pushed off from shore that day, experienced fishermen were manning those boats. Mark records that other boats were on the lake that day besides the one Jesus was in. The fishermen had ample experience dealing with the uncertain weather of Galilee. They had weathered many storms and survived. They knew how to read the signs. They knew they had to keep one eye on their nets and one eye on the horizon, but they were still unprepared. Their skills had been refined under challenging circumstances, but despite their best efforts, they could not prevent their boat from filling with water and nearly sinking. Worst of all, their exhausted spiritual leader was fast asleep.

I believe we can empathize with the fishermen: When we need God the most, God most likely appears to be asleep. Yet the reality in this story is that Jesus was in the boat. The disciples only needed to call upon him to awaken him. He was there waiting to hear their voice.

When the storm swept over the disciples, they panicked and lost control. When Jesus awoke, his presence had a calming effect and they were able to regain their composure and they battled the gale. They handled the impossible situation with courage and confidence.

But Mark wants us to know that something much more than this happened that day. Jesus did not speak to the disciples. He addressed the wind. The word of rebuke was the same word that he previously used to drive out a demon. Mark appears to be telling us that even when there is the presence of evil in the storm, the power of God is able to deliver the believer.

You see, Jesus calmed the hearts of those men by calming the fury of the gale.
As I reflect upon this, I realize that the experience of the fishermen was not unlike my experience in first grade; I was glad to meet Wicky and have a new friend, but my heart was not calmed until the fury of the playground was calmed.

The storms of life may threaten us. There will be days when they seem to overwhelm us. But Christ has taken the fury out of them all. Therefore, we can live each and every day by faith. We will not panic. We will not lose control. Our God is yet able to deliver us.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful God, we share the conviction of the Psalmist that you are our stronghold in times of trouble and we rejoice over the evidence of such care for us and for all people that we experience in Christ Jesus. Yet, we confess how easily we identify with the fear of the disciples when they were caught in the storm; like them, our faith falters and our anxiety levels soar when life becomes too turbulent for us. Time and again, the stresses of living and working and learning threaten to swamp us. Our lives sometimes feel as though they are spinning out of control with worries over health, relationships, finances, and the state of the world.... We forget that Jesus is in our midst, calming our fears and strengthening us especially when we feel most vulnerable and fearful and weak.

Gracious God, forgive us all our fears and weaknesses, we pray. Renew and strengthen our faith in the living Christ so that we can live empowered by his presence. This we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

We dedicate these gifts and our lives to you, O God, in thanksgiving for your great gift of your son, Jesus, through whom we know an inner peace, which is beyond our human understanding. Strengthen and empower us with your Holy Spirit to be bearers of this peace wherever we go. This we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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Proper 8
Date: 02 July 2000
Title: “Healing, Wholeness and Salvation”
Text: Mark 5:21-45

Today’s gospel lesson is a story within a story. Both stories are about healings, and both deal with touching. For the sake of simplicity, I would like to concentrate on the story within the story this morning – the story of a woman who was healed when she touched Jesus’ clothes.

Who was this person who touched Jesus? Was she a person of faith? Probably not! Was she superstitious? Obviously! She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak. Jesus’ reacted naturally and asked, “Who did that?”
His disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" [32]

He looked all around to see who had done it. [33] But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. [34] He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." (Mark 5:31-34). She might have been superstitious before she met Jesus, but now she was not, because she realized what had happened to her as a result of her action.

According to the law of her day, she was not allowed to be out in public. It was certainly against the law of her time for her to touch anyone. That did not matter to Jesus, and, obviously, that did not matter to the woman. Jesus used the same words with the woman as he used with other healed persons. There is however the interesting reversal of the direction of the action in this healing story. Many times Jesus touched others. Here, another person touches Jesus. The initiation of the healing process is backwards, but it works anyway. Her faith made her well. Her faith, as shallow as it was, saved her. She, like all the others who were healed, went in peace and she was healed. As the old King James Bible put it, she was “made whole.”

How strange it is that Jesus’ healing touch and healing presence worked as well in reverse as in drive!

Touch is so important in healing, and yet how sensitive many people are to touch. Back in the 1960s and early 1970s there was a great deal of touching and hugging going on. Close community ties and a strong sense of togetherness marked the peace movement. “Make love, not war,” was a favorite chant of the times. Those were touchy-feely times in more ways than one.

The past two decades have nearly seen an end to touching. If a secretary is touched by her boss, she might file a sexual harassment charge against her boss. Teachers are told again and again not to touch their students. There are good reasons for this, but when it comes to the point that a kindergarten teacher cannot hug one of her students on the child’s birthday, something is wrong.

Then, again, how do we respond to the hugs of others? If a close friend gives us a hug, that is OK, but it is usually not OK for just anybody to do so.

I recall a woman from a neighboring church who frequently visited the church I was serving. My congregation was very formal in its worship. Her church had a large number of “huggy” people, and every time she visited our church she greeted me after the worship service by throwing her arms around me and giving me a big hug. The members of my congregation stood in shock, and I am certain that I probably turned beet red. I am not a person who shies away from touching others. I often hold the hand of someone I am praying with. I am prone to pat a person on the shoulder for work well done. I am pretty
good at hugging when I think hugging is appropriate. But for someone with whom I have only a casual, marginal relationship, an overt, all-embracing, very close hug that nearly pushes me over can be rather uncomfortable.

Remember the bumper stickers of years ago that read, “Have you hugged someone today?” I often thought when I saw those stickers that they should read, “Do you know someone who needs a hug today?” That moves us in a positive direction, and makes more sense.

Hugs and touchings of any kind, seem so out of place today in our litigious society, and yet, if the touching stops, we must ask ourselves if the healing will also stop - if the wholeness will also stop - if the faith will also stop, and if we will no longer be able to find a way to go forth into this world in peace.

Healing, restoration, wholeness, both physical and spiritual, all are contained in the meaning of the words that Jesus spoke that day, but probably none of the above would have marked that day if someone had not reached out and touched someone else.

Last week we heard about Jesus quieting the storm. We also recalled the fact that the hearts and minds of the disciples were not calmed until the storm was calmed. But no calm would have come to anyone if the disciples had not touched Jesus. “They went and woke him up, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing.’” It was not good enough for them to wait for Jesus to touch them; they needed to touch Jesus.

There are many times in our lives when we wait and wait and wait for God to act, when we wait and wait for the living Christ to break into our lives and save us, when we expect the healing presence of God’s Spirit to connect with our spirit, and nothing happens. Why? Perhaps, it is because God is waiting for us to take the initiative, for us to act, for us to reach out and touch someone.

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Proper 10
Date: 13 July 1997
Title: “Intimate Comprehension”
Text: Ephesians 1:3-14

Of all Paul's writings, my favorite is his encyclical, or circular letter to the Christians in Ephesus. It is known as Paul's most sublime writing, which is an interesting comment, because some of Paul's writing is anything but sublime. Instead of Paul's usual, complex mumbo jumbo, we here have a brief, concise, and gracious letter.

We begin with a thanksgiving for blessings, which is our lesson today. In the New International Version, which we have in our church pews, we begin with, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms
with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."

The New Revised Standard Version begins, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.”

These are happy words. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," the familiar words of the doxology we sing each Sunday might be a good summary of Paul's message here.

"Praise be to God," "Blessed be God," "Bless God," all these are words used in different translations of this sublime doxology in praise of the works of God which are simply too good to be true. "Praise." "Blessing." Where we find the one we can also usually read the other.

Paul's message is clear, basic and brief. God has worked in and through Jesus Christ in order to "bless" believers. So, praise God! And, blessed be God!

Of course, this is something basic that we celebrate every Sunday morning, and I say basic, because Paul's teaching here is universal, not specific. So many Christians treat Paul's words as if the Christian message is only one addressed to those who are saved. It is important to note here, that this author is not interested in defining who is saved and who is not, or who is chosen and why or who is not chosen and why not. The message here is far more basic. It is, simply, that God works graciously through Christ for the benefit of all people.

The good news here is inclusive because it is not good news about us; it is good news about God. Take, for instance, the way some Christians use the phrase, "in Christ," as if to relate to being "in Christ" is to relate to membership in a mystical club. There is nothing mystical going on here. Instead, the plain sense of this phrase is spatial. To be "in Christ" can mean simply to be "in church." We are "in Christ," we are members of a church, because of something God did, not because of something we did. It is God who works graciously through Christ for our benefit. This is not something we do, but something God does. You see, writes Paul, the gospel message has meaning for us, but it is not about us; it is about God.

I often think Christians miss this point, and that is why I am pounding you with it this morning.

When Christians become worried about who is chosen and why, they have clearly missed the main point of the gospel. It is as if they had studied the faith as they might study arithmetic, which, in grammar school, traditionally starts with addition. What is the object of adding one number to another? Is it merely the adding itself, and the endless process of adding one number after another? No, because there needs to be an end, somewhere--the sum. The sum is the end to which the adding process is directed.
Without an end, we face the problem Shakespeare wrote about in Macbeth:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
...it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Our lesson this morning applies to a larger scene.

As the small land rover creeps over the surface of Mars, tasting rocks, sending back spellbinding pictures, we might ask ourselves as we have probably asked ourselves many times, “Can we find meaning in the universe?”

What is the "end" and the “sum” of Paul’s message? What is the meaning of it? It is precisely this: The kingdom of God, of our Lord's teaching. That is the sum. That is the goal. That is the joy, the hope, and the awareness: that is the richness of God's grace.

Therefore, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.”

Amen.

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Proper 11
Date: 20 July 1997
Title: “First Principles”
Text: II. Samuel 7:1-14

At the end of rocky point of land above a small cove, on the southern shore of Iceland, there is a beautiful little church called Sjoman's Kirkja, The Sailor's Church. No pastor has ever been assigned there. No congregation has worshipped there on a regular basis. The building has been the site of an occasional wedding, or funeral, but nothing more.

The lovely little building in its pristine setting exists as a testimony to the honor and glory of God by the skipper of a fishing boat, who, one stormy night, when his prayers to Thor seemed to be in vain, prayed instead to the Christian God. "God of the Lord Jesus Christ, if you save me and my crew from the tempest I will build you a church." Through the darkness, a light appeared on the shore. The skipper followed the light, but as the ship drew nearer and nearer to the rocky shore, pounded by monstrous waves, his hopes were dashed. Suddenly, the small ship was swept into the calm waters of a small cove, in the lee of a rocky point, where the boat's crew safely beached their craft. After offering
prayers of thanks for their deliverance, they fell asleep on the shore. When the captain awoke the next morning, there was nothing and no one anywhere in sight that could have been a source of light the night before. Soon after, with the profits from his catch, the skipper returned to the rocky point to build a church, as he had promised.

I am sure we can understand the sincere desire of the Icelandic captain. I am also certain that we understand David's sincere desire to advance the cause of true religion and honor the glory of God by building a temple. In both cases, that which is honestly meant to be a means to the more effective worship of God degenerates into becoming an end in itself, and the devotion which should be given to God alone, becomes attached to the maintenance and preservation of the hallowed structure.

The images of the Temple, in both the Old Testament lesson and in the lesson from Ephesians, portray the temple as the work of God, not of human hands. We realize this as we learn that the temple built by Solomon did not endure, being the work of human hands. The Apostle Paul wrote about another kind of temple—about people becoming a temple, and the son of David, Jesus Christ, being the cornerstone.

This should remind us that the New Testament word for "church," "ecclesia," means, "assembly," not "building."

Paul, with his emphasis on the apostles and prophets, calls us back to the first principles of our faith, to the understanding that the Church is a historically conditioned institution that emerged from objective, articulated historical events involving real people.

We who worship here, who care for this building, surely have a sincere desire to advance the cause of our religion and to honor the glory of God. But, as we look around at this well-maintained and sturdy structure, we might also remember the words of the Apostle Paul, and the sincere desire of King David. The availability of God is not limited to the confines of a building. God is available in every changing circumstance for every human need. God is ever striking his tent and moving on up ahead of us to a new location in history.

Just as this building was built and then rebuilt after the town burned, "to the glory of God," as a properly erected temple, so to speak, we who worship here each week need to keep it in the category of an "upper room, furnished," where we commune with God, and from which, having "sung a hymn," we go out to preach the gospel, and minister to the needs of God's people, and follow Christ across the frontiers of the future.
“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” (Mark. 6:31b)

An old lady opened her refrigerator and saw a cartoon rabbit sitting on one of the shelves. “What are you doing in there?” she asked.
The rabbit replied: “This wewigewaitor is a Westinghouse wewigewaitor, isn't it?”
To which the old lady answered, “Yes.”
“Well,” the rabbit said, “I'm westing.”

This is “westing” season. For most of us, summer means some kind of respite from the usual routine. Many Americans take a vacation during this season. Friends of ours in Nashua have gone to Colorado, Montana, Canada, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan on vacations. Some went to Los Vegas, Arkansas and Missouri, but I don’t know why; I guess it wasn’t hot enough here.

DO YOU THINK Jesus ever took a vacation? The gospel lesson this morning indicates that he did. He at least called his disciples to a quiet place.

I can relate to this. After three hot weeks of work on our house in Nashua, plus the noise of construction next door as our neighbors are having a huge three car garage built, it was so delightful to bring our camper up here to Lake Hendricks on Monday morning, and stay here for three whole days of peace and quiet. Mary and I so enjoyed the time here and the opportunity to visit with some of you.

I remember what vacation meant to my family as I was growing up; it was something we all looked forward to all year long. “Vacation” doesn’t seem to mean the same thing to families today. The fact is that most of us Americans do not vacation very well, although we love to fantasize about it. How many of you have gone on vacation this summer? How many of you doubt that you will? The plain truth is that we are uncomfortable with “time off.” Whether we are in the work force or retired, we often shortchange our personal lives, and most of us can count on one hand the number of vacations our families have taken together that lasted more than one week.

Why is there this reluctance on our part? Partly it is the way we have been reared. But it is not just we who are still working at jobs who have difficulty with rest. Retired people too are sometimes reluctant to get away.

We do not vacation well because we consider rest an indulgence. Too many of us consider it as something we do not really deserve. We do not want anybody to think we are lazy.

One day, Jesus insisted that his disciples take some time off. They needed a rest. They needed a place to relax. He was not encouraging them to be lazy; rather he was encouraging them to find some peace in the company of the Lord.

So, today, or tomorrow, or in the weeks ahead, while you can,
Take time to LAUGH, it is the music of the soul.
Take time to THINK, it is the source of power.
Take time to PLAY, it is the source of perpetual youth.
Take time to READ, it is the foundation of wisdom.
Take time to PRAY, it is the greatest power on earth.
Take time to LOVE AND BE LOVED, it is a God-given privilege.
Take time to be FRIENDLY, it is the road to happiness.
Take time to GIVE, it is too short a day to be selfish.
Take time to WORK, it is the price of success.
Take time for GOD, it is the way of life.

And remember that the Christ who modeled rest not by a trip to Disney World but by a boat ride to a deserted place, which led to a picnic with leftovers of blessings, wants you to rest easy tonight.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, you have called us to follow you, not run ahead of you. Teach us to balance our lives, so that we might be whole in body, mind and spirit. Help us to know when to run the race, when to walk with you, and when to simply be still and know that you are God. Deepen both our knowledge of you, and our love for you. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

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Proper 12
Date: 27 July 1997
Title: “The Authority of Jesus”
Text: John 6:16-21 (1-21)

John, Mark and Matthew obviously draw upon the same tradition when they tell the story about crossing the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea of Tiberius, to Capernaum. In many ways, John's version is the most perplexing. The words, "by now it was dark," are strange and differ from the other accounts. Also strange are the words, "immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading." These two mysterious announcements are not explained, and therefore leave our wild imaginations open to speculation.

It is not my purpose, this morning, however, to de-mystify this story. If anything, I would like to leave you suitably mystified so that you might read also the parallel accounts in Mark and Matthew and come to your own conclusions.

Over the years I have become more perplexed about this text from the preaching I have heard than from the text itself. Some preachers have tried to explain the science of the story, only to explain away the power of this narrative. Other preachers I have heard have
said something like, "Well, I don't know whether he walked on the water or not, but I do know that Jesus came to me in the struggles of my life." That, too, sells short the profundity of this story.

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS. Jesus deals with the intentions of the crowd. He leaves them. He exercises authority over the elements of nature and he speaks with confidence and power to the disciples. That is basically what he does.

And what happens? What is the biggest thing that happens? Is it Jesus walking on water? No! The truth of the matter is, that if we take the original Greek words in John that are translated "walking on water," they can simply mean "by the water." The original means, simply, "by the sea." These words are translated "out on the sea," only because, in Mark's account, the boat is placed clearly in the middle of the sea.

As far as the "science" of this story is concerned, truly, I think the jokes based upon it are as meaningful as any interpretation I have read. I am certain that all of you here this morning have heard some form of this story:

One day, a Catholic Priest, a Congregational Minister and a Jewish Rabbi went fishing. They got in their boat, and set off across the lake. When they had rowed some distance, they paused to try their luck. After several castings, the priest snagged his line. He stepped out of the boat, walked a ways on the water, un-snagged the line, returned to the boat, and resumed fishing. Soon after, the Congregational minister snagged his line. He stepped out of the boat, walked a ways on the water, un-snagged his line, returned to the boat, and resumed fishing. Later the rabbi snagged his line. He stepped out of the boat and immediately sank out of sight. When the rabbi resurfaced, cursing his companions, the Congregational minister looked at the priest and asked, "Should we show him where the rocks are?"

This humorous reflection on the Biblical story, avoids getting into the science of the Biblical story, but I am even more fond of several variations of this joke. From the early years of President Clinton's presidency a wonderful story emerged, reflecting upon the president's earnest efforts and the constant negative reporting of the press.

One day, the Pope called President Clinton to invite the president to Italy so that the two men might solve all the world's problems. The President accepted the Pope's invitation, flew to Italy, and the two met at a beautiful villa on the shores of a scenic lake in northern Italy. They sat down together in a large, ornate room in the villa and began to list all of the world's problems and solve each of them one by one.

Soon the room became very crowded and stuffy, as people gathered to watch the two solve all of the world's problems. The two became distracted, so President Clinton suggested to the Pope that, since it was such a beautiful day, perhaps they should go outside where they could continue their discussion with less distraction. On the villa's
veranda, overlooking the lake, there were two large lawn chairs into which they settled and continued to solve the world's problems.

Soon the crowd made its way around both sides of the villa and began pressing in upon them. They picked up the two chairs, and moved them down the sweeping lawn toward the lake. The growing crowd kept moving toward them, threatening to engulf them from both sides. So the president said to the Pope, "Let's walk down to the lake shore." The crowd followed, and grew even larger. When the president and the pope reached the shore of the lake, they noticed a dock with a small boat tied to it. "Look," said President Clinton to the Pope, "let's get in the boat, I'll row out to the middle of the lake and we can finish solving the world's problems without any more interruptions."

As the two continued their conversation in the boat, the wind picked up, and soon a strong puff flipped the pope's cap off his head and blew it about a hundred feet before it landed in the water. Clinton, impulsively, stepped out of the boat, walked over to the sinking cap, snatched it up, walked back to the boat, wrung it out and handed it back to the Pope, who thanked the president for retrieving his cap. The next day, the headline of the Washington Post read, "President can't swim."

Notice how this variation avoids getting into the science of the original. Our gospel story this morning goes way beyond what most people are prepared to believe, or are able to understand, but do we really need to understand it? Do we really need to explain it? What is there to explain? What is there to understand?

Of course, we are asking the wrong questions. If we want to find the real miracle here, we need to ask a different question: What happens?

First the faith and power of Jesus is contrasted to the lack of faith and the lack of power of the disciples. Second, the disciples cower in their own reasonable sense of inadequacy. Third, through the faith and power of Jesus, the disciples are given the courage they do not otherwise have. The sermon tasters and the free loaders who had all enjoyed a free lunch, swarmed after Jesus to get everything they could get out of him. But they had no idea of what was really happening.

I would not speculate on the headlines of the Capernaum papers the next day, but as the press chased after Jesus along with the crowd from Tiberius, I would not doubt at all, that a headline in Tiberius the next day could have read, "Jesus can't swim."

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Proper 12
Date: 03 August 1997
Title: “The Basis of Christian Oneness”
Text: Ephesians 4:1-16
This morning we will consider Paul's unity theme. Paul talks about the unity of the Church, the unity of the faith, and the church as a community. Originally, I planned to talk about how we can test the legitimacy of our gifts in the way of our talents and tendencies and capacities. But, as I studied this text, Paul's theme of unity and oneness seemed to be more important.

Paul's words about unity and community seem to be very direct and clear. He uses a great many catch words that are familiar to Christians, and in so doing, he sounds familiar and common, to the point of comforting us more than confronting us. Therefore, let us take a few moments to discover how confrontational these words about unity really are for people like us.

First of all, our society believes in a rather rugged individualism. Modern thought has caused us to think of personality in terms of individualism for so long, that it is difficult for us to recapture the sense of personality when applied to a corporate fact like a group of people, such as a village, who occupy a certain geographical area, or a family, who occupy a certain home, or a church congregation. Contemporary history, however, is re-educating us so that we again take a corporate "spirit" and incorporate personality seriously. The saying, "It takes a village to raise a child," is one example.

So, we might ask ourselves, "Why is it that some communities are better places to live than others?" "Why do twice as many high school graduates from a particular small school system go to college as from a neighboring school system twice the size?" "Why are some congregations of Christians constantly at war while others grow and prosper in unity and peace?"

To use Paul's language, there are, we might say, a multitude of spirits. Spirits wield power. They mold individual personalities. They take possession of individuals and groups. They can transform rational people into beasts. They can also transform sinners like you and me into saints. Spirits are the great creators of unity among people, whether the unity is good or evil.

We who live in the heartland often talk about the spirit of America, and we hear others refer to that spirit, and the image is positive. The re-occurrence of terrorist bombings in Israel, however, and the constant threat of such terrorist attacks in our own country remind us that other people with different motives can also be united in spirit.

We hear a great deal about bringing people together to discuss their differences. If people united and ruled by different spirits would just get together and talk around a conference table, they will eventually be at peace. Of course, we know that just getting people together does not work.

Should a Protestant Irish group be allowed to march through an Irish Catholic neighborhood? Sure, some people say. There is no harm in that.
We Americans, especially, have a problem with this. We take great pride in our right to peaceful assembly, to the point of ignoring sometimes the fact that simply putting people together is not going to solve the problems caused by our diversity.

All of us here this morning have certainly lived long enough to know that unity is not achieved by simply bringing people together. In the language of the business world, "let's have our people get together with your people," does not usually bring about unity. Remember when Ross Perot used that business language during one of his campaigns--the "your people, my people" language that unites the corporate world. Representatives of Black communities and the press jumped all over Perot, accusing him of being prejudice and bigoted and racist. All he was doing was using the unifying language of the corporate world, in the unifying spirit of the corporate world. But the things that unite one group can often disrupt another group.

What then, can unite people? What spirit is common to all people?

Paul describes the answer in precise terms. Where Christ is, there is unity. In verses four through six, Paul emphasizes this fact with his use of the word "one," some seven times:

ONE BODY...
ONE SPIRIT...
ONE HOPE...
ONE LORD...
ONE FAITH...
ONE BAPTISM...
ONE GOD...

All we need to do is to listen to the daily news and we know that our world is constantly being called to great unifying adventures. The problem is, however, that so many people, especially those united in spirit, confuse unity with uniformity. If everyone would just do everything the way we want it done, we can all live in harmony. That is a call to uniformity, not unity. And that is why Paul described in today's lesson the great diversity in unity and the variety of gifts that can flourish in a unified church.

Right here, this morning, there are as many gifts as there are individuals, and there are as many personalities, but there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and there is only one God. The differences and the distinctions of human beings do not change this.

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Proper 12  
Date: 06 August 2000  
Title: "A Time to Remember"
Food and beverages help us remember. For instance, if I say TURKEY, what do you remember?

PUMPKIN PIE? What do you remember and whom do you remember?

At our picnic last Sunday, one person noted that even with all the wonderful food we shared together, something was missing: lemon poppy seed cake. Of course everyone within earshot immediately remembered our dear Ella Miles and her delicious cake.

Some time ago, on a cool, damp, cloudy afternoon, I was trying to concentrate on the business at hand, and needed either some kind of perk, or a nap. I made a small pot of hot tea, and poured it into a cup on a saucer, instead of into the usual mug. I added some sugar, which I almost never add, and, because the tea was very hot, I added just a bit of milk. I sipped it slowly as I nibbled on a cookie.

Suddenly, I recalled my great grandmother and the many times family members and I had tea with her of an afternoon. “You put milk in tea—cream in coffee.” She would serve the fanciest confections, and little sandwiches, and marzipans and chocolates and candied fruits. As a child, I thought Great Grandmother’s parlor was the only place on earth where such things were served.

I was alone that damp afternoon, but not lonely.

When you eat and drink, what and whom do you remember?

In his book, The Swann’s Way, the French novelist Marcel Proust wrote of returning home late one evening on a dull winter day when he faced the prospect of a depressing tomorrow. The maid greeted him and, seeing that he was tired, brought him a cup of hot tea and some cake. Being both tired and depressed, he at first refused them. Only at her insistence did he finally begin to drink the tea and eat the cake. Proust wrote that an unexplainable delight suddenly came over him. His anxieties and troubles seemed to vanish. Suddenly, he wrote, I had "ceased to feel mediocre, accidental and mortal."

What caused this wonderful sensation to come over him? He was at a loss to explain it. How could a taste of tea and cake produce this feeling of peace? He drank and ate more, but he still could not decipher the secret. The truth, he guessed, must be in himself and not in what he was eating and drinking.

Proust began to search within himself. Suddenly he began to remember. His mind carried him back to Combray, France where in childhood he visited his Aunt and she fed him cake and hot tea. Proust had been unmoved by the sight of the tea and cake but the taste had sent shockwaves through him and reminded him of scenes long forgotten. Suddenly he remembered the little town, the village church, the old house, the long forgotten relatives, and the flowers in the garden. The tea and cake had recovered for Proust the memory and mystery of an existence long past.
Is it, indeed, possible to hand a person a cup of tea and say to that person, “Now drink this and remember who you are?” It not only is possible, but I submit to you this morning that in a real sense this is what we do when we partake of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. By partaking of the bread and the cup, we are seeking to recover the experience of salvation. Like the novelist, Proust, it causes us to think back on experiences that happened long ago, and in remembering these experiences we begin to recover our own sense of identity. In a haunting and mystical way the sacrament calls us to remember--to remember who we are, and to remember whose we are.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Heavenly Father, bless these gifts and our lives offered in response to the blessings we receive as we are nourished and fed by you with spiritual food that endures and transforms our lives. May we bless others by being signs of your transforming work in the world, sharing bread with the hungry and witnessing to our belief in you. Amen.

One Sunday morning, in his sermon, the Roman Catholic priest of an inner-city parish chastised the young men who were attending the worship service for taking guns to school during the previous week. Another priest, who was visiting from out of town, commented to the preacher, "the church must be doing something right, since the gun toters were here to be chastised."

I am quite sure that some of my colleagues in the United Church of Christ find themselves in such positions from time to time in their urban ministries. As I read Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus I realize that any pastor can find himself very close to some of society's most serious problems.

Paul's letter indicates that the Ephesus congregation included thieves, people who used profane language, people who brawled and slandered one another and carried on like no civilized human beings were supposed to do even two thousand years ago. Was the church in Ephesus doing something right by accepting such people into their fellowship? Probably not deliberately, because that is probably the only kind of people they had available at the time.

At the time, thievery was a way of life. Even today, if you travel in the Middle East, you will need to make sure that your credit cards and cash are safe in your money belt. If you put a piece of luggage down, it might not be there when you reach to pick it up.
Might a colleague of Paul's have turned to Paul one day and said, the church in Ephesus must be doing something right: they have so many riff-raff attending worship there?

As we consider the makeup of the congregation in Ephesus, it may seem rather radical. Most churches in America give the impression that even though God's grace is free and unmerited, it is only available to those who do not need it, which makes grace sort of like the new tax cuts just passed by congress, which benefit mostly those who do not need them. So, when and where and how do we get what we need when we need it? If God's grace is free and unmerited, why does it seem to be most available to those who need it the least?

I think Paul makes his point very well in today's lesson, although it may be easily missed because of the way he arranges his statements. The last verse in our lesson holds the key. "Live a life of love." Paul is saying that Christians are to live their lives as they aspire to live. God's grace is available to all. Therefore, we must live as if we know that we have already received it.

This is consistent with what Jesus preached about the Kingdom of God: the Kingdom is already among us. All we need to do to make the Kingdom real, is to live as if the Kingdom of God were already here. In other words, our lives in the present are to be accurate anticipations of the realization of the will of God. Our present lives, right now, today, are defined by God's will for us in the future. God wants us to live better lives and God wants that to be evident to the people around us.

We Christians, says Paul, are to be humble, yes, but not to the point of lowering the standards of justice. So, you see, we Christians still need the Ten Commandments and all the other tools of the moral life of humans, because it is as forgiven sinners that we humble ourselves, not as pickled saints. Those who follow Christ, says Paul, are to put away their falsehoods. This is not easy, because most of us are rather secretive when it comes to the truth.

I recall one of Eugene O'Neill's plays, in which there is a double dialogue: first the dialogue actually spoken by the characters, and then the dialogue of the unspoken thoughts which are held back in the hearts and minds of the speakers. And the two dialogues do not agree. This is sort of like carrying on a polite conversation with someone we despise, only to spend the next hour revising what was actually said into what you would like to have said.

Paul had a great deal of keen insight into human nature. Christians are to be consistent in their behavior. Every meeting with a neighbor presents an occasion for imparting grace to those who hear what we say and see what we do. This is the will God has for us, and this is the way God treats us, therefore we are called to respond to this love as a child should rightly respond, by imitating God's love as a dearly loved child would automatically imitate a loving parent.
God's children speak the truth. They can get angry without sinning. They work honestly. They share with the needy. They say what is useful, and they are kind and loving to others. If this is so straightforward and so easy to understand, why then do so many people fail to anticipate the will of God?

My wandering thoughts this week led me to recall two of the characters on “Laugh In,” which was one of the favorite TV shows of my youth. All the sketches they did, ended the same way.

The woman, holding a large handbag, would sit on a park bench. Along would come the old man and sit beside her. He would move a little closer, she would huff and grunt and move away from him. He would move a little closer, she would grumble and move away again. During the process, he would usually ask her a question.

One day the old man asked, "Do you believe in the hereafter?" He moved a little closer, "Do you believe in the hereafter." She let out a moan, and moved farther down the bench. He moved closer, "Do you believe in the hereafter." She moaned again, and moved on down the bench. Soon the woman was at the end of the bench. The old man moves as close as he can, and says, "Do you believe in the hereafter?"

With nowhere else to go, the woman replies, "Yes, of course."

The old man then says, "Then perhaps you know what I'm here after."

She then ends the scene in the standard and expected way, by hitting the dirty old man with her handbag.

God's will for our future does not depend on the hereafter; it depends upon the present. It depends upon every meeting we have with other people, because every meeting is an occasion for imparting grace to those who hear what we say, and see what we do.

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Proper 14
Date: 13 August 2000
Meditation: “Bread Is Bread!”
Text: John 6:35, 41-51

For months our gospel readings have contained references to Jesus as the bread of life. Bread is also called the “staff of life.” Why? Because, bread is bread. If you are starving, a slice of bread, and a cup of water will keep you alive for another day.

How do we consider bread? The word “bread” in this day and age can mean anything that we like to eat. How much do we eat? Science shows us that the average human being eats sixteen times his or her weight in one year. That is a great deal of food. My brother and I
spent a considerable amount of time around horses while we were young. Horses eat all
day long, but horses eat only eight times their body weight in a year.

People in Jesus’ day ate very little. A piece of dried fish and a small loaf of bread the size
of a dinner roll could sustain a person all day. They fed their livestock very well. They
also took very good care of their crops, because their crops fed both their livestock and
themselves.

When Jesus said, “I am the bread of life,” he balanced all these equations. Remember
that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem means literally, “house of bread,” or “city
of bread.” It is surely a remarkable coincidence that Jesus who called himself the “bread
of life,” and called upon all of his followers to feed the hungry, was born in a town called
“The Town of Bread.”

Bread is bread, and we all know how bread is made. Even though I do not live in an area
where wheat is grown, I still know that bread comes from grain that grows in the wind
and the rain with a farmer’s help far from the eyes of people like you and me. I also
believe that bread comes from love: the love of God, the love of farmers who raise wheat
and rye, and from the love of bakers’ hands. I also believe that bread can and should be
baked and broken and shared and given to all persons until all have enough and then
some. I also believe that Jesus loved bread and took it and broke it and blessed it and fed
his disciples and asked them to feed others.

Last week we blessed bread, and broke bread, and ate bread, and shared that bread with
one another. Since then, what have you done to share that bread with others? My point is
that bread is not a piece of cake. Bread takes a lot of work. The bread of life needs
blessing and breaking and eating and sharing.

In America, most people just play with bread. They buy it; they usually do not make it,
unless they have one of those bread-making machines. Have you ever eaten bread that
was made in a bread-making machine? I have, and it certainly was not very exciting. I do
recall enjoying great bread in a certain Italian restaurant. Have you ever gone to a really
great Italian restaurant? No matter how grand the entrées may be, their bread will
probably make or break your impression of the place. Bread is bread!

We all get hungry. We all know the gnawing feeling in the pit of the stomach when we
go without food. We all need bread. We also know that hunger defines the feelings of
most of the human beings on the face of the earth. And what are Americans doing about
that? They are watching TV shows like “Survivor.” Mary and I cannot judge the show,
really, because we have watched only the news releases and interviews. But, just from
that perspective, how empty, how shallow, how self-centered, how purposeless can
human beings be?

Jesus offers bread to even people like that. Will they ever see it? Will they ever taste it?
The bread I held in my hands last week, where did it come from? Somewhere, someone grew the grain. God watered it. Humans planted it, weeded it, nurtured and harvested it by the grace of God. Humans processed it, transported it, baked it, packed it, shipped it, unloaded it, delivered it, and put it on shelves. Then somebody who made money from some other occupation bought it, and took it home, and served it to his or her family.

Bread is bread! Whenever we lift up a loaf of bread, we lift up a whole network of humanity

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” What does this mean to you? The next time you serve yourself or others a piece of bread, why not pause to think about what your action actually means? How will you bless it, break it, eat it, and share it?

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Proper 15
Date: 20 August 2000
Text: Ephesians 5:15-20

“Be very careful, then, how you live - not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity….‖ (Ephesians 5:15-16)

Mary and I took a vacation last year and the year before. For one reason or another, we did not take one this year. We did not do much of anything in the way of venturing away from home. We greatly enjoy a Story County campground near Ames, but we did not go there, because Allen was not in Ames this summer. We were going to visit a few places in southeastern Minnesota, but, as we were making our traveling plans, the planned destinations had flooding, and then, of course, after the flooding come the mosquitoes. Forget that! We were also rather busy with work on our house, and a number of business projects, and gardening, and the list is endless. All in all it was a good summer for us to spend at home and close to home, at least as far as getting things done that really needed to be done. The only problem is, that besides a couple of very pleasant but short overnight trips to Riceville and Lake Hendricks, we really did nothing that would qualify as a vacation.

Now, Mary is back to school, and our regular work routines have kicked back into high gear. During the past week, I did, however, find a few extra minutes to reflect upon Ephesians 5:16, and Paul’s admonition to “redeem the time” around me. When I think of redeeming the time around me, I think of going somewhere in our camper, or spending a day on our sailboat on Clear Lake, or anything else that can serve as an illustration of the word “vacation.”

Do you suppose then, that Paul meant for us to redeem even our vacation time? Of course he did. No doubt about it. Paul is a stickler for details like this. What the NRSV translates in Ephesians 5:16 as “making the most of the time” is rendered more literally as, "to buy
out,” or, “to buy back,” or "to redeem" time. Coupled with the claim that "the days are evil," this text conveys a sense of unmistakable urgency.

Truthfully, Paul always seems to be urgent, so what else is new?

It is this sense of unmistakable urgency that troubles me as I set about "making the most of every opportunity." It troubles me, because I see myself, and a great many people like you and me, expending a great deal of nervous energy on stuff that is not of the highest spiritual priority. Sometimes we are terribly passionate about things that really do not matter very much one way or the other.

On the other hand, I find myself disturbingly complacent about some of the most important spiritual and social issues swirling about, and I sense that complacency in others. At times we are almost immune to the moving of the Spirit. We may make the most of the paycheck or retirement check we get in the mail, but we are almost indifferent to the free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Why? Because the urgency is missing and so is the desire to make the most of the time we have in celebrating and sharing the Gospel in word and deed. The sense of urgency is missing.

One day, weeks ago, I saw a church sign that read, “Aspire to inspire before you expire!” Now there is a sense of expectancy! I think that is pretty good, and you might just see those words out on our church sign someday. (repeat) That is very close to what Paul was saying to the Ephesians. One way to do that is to "redeem" the time in which you are living, to make the most of it, to "buy it back" from those who would squander it in selfish living.

Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Version of Paul's Epistles lays this out with an earthy Southern accent: "Take extra care, then, how you live - not like nitwits but like wits. Use your time as though you had to buy it, because there's a lot of wickedness around these days." The urgency returns with that phrase, "use your time as though you had to buy it".

Time is a gift, a precious gift that is to be savored and shared whether it is filled with significant production or not. If you did not buy it, then someone else surely did.

For far too long I have considered time more as a vacuum to fill up with good works than a gift to be savored. Have you ever felt that way? Paul’s emphasis, however, is not on excessive business any more than it is on excessive laziness. His emphasis, instead, seems to center around our need to redeem the time around us by responding to the opportunities we have each day to build God’s Kingdom. His idea here is not about clock time, it is about what one Christian writer calls “kingdom time—kingdom opportunities,” those real, recurrent opportunities we have for ministry that often come at extremely inconvenient times: a friend who wants and needs to talk, a child with a problem, a person in need who needs a hand.

Paul is encouraging us to keep our lives uncluttered enough so that we can respond when the need arises, because kingdom opportunities get squeezed out of overly tight
schedules. This "uncluttering" of our lives takes time, however. It is not easily understood until it is practiced. Slowly, but surely, even I am learning and experiencing this. I look forward to opportunities for simplifying my life if only for a few days at a time. I look forward to divesting my life of as many trappings of the world as possible. I will admit to you this morning, however, that this conviction has come to me only with age and experience. As a young pastor, I wanted the best of everything: the biggest church, the best sermons in town, the most active youth group, the nicest parsonage, the quickest recognition by my superiors of a job well done. I also wanted the best of the world: a new car, a home of my own and a cottage on a lake, or better yet on the New Jersey shore.

Well, after all these years, Mary and I do have a home of our own, but not much else. And what a pain all that ambition was to bear! Things and stuff! Stuff and things! Is that what redeems time? NO!

And so, at the end of a vacation-less summer, I take the words of Paul to heart. And the colloquial modern translation of Clarence Jordan pierces me. I don't want to live like a "nitwit." I do want to use my time "as though I had to buy it." I want to cherish it. I want to celebrate its goodness.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We sing our praises and thanksgivings to you, most holy God, as we joyfully worship you in gladness and song - our response to your gracious activity in our lives. You gather us together through the power and wisdom of your Holy Spirit and transform us into a community graced and held together by Jesus Christ, our Lord. Help us to make the most of our time here today as we seek to glorify you. Help us to realize that:

Giving up implies a struggle—Letting go implies a partnership.
Giving up dreads the future—Letting go looks forward to the future.
Giving up lives out of fear—Letting go lives out of grace and trust.
Giving up is a defeat—Letting go is a victory.
Giving up is unwillingly yielding control to forces beyond ourselves—Letting go is choosing to yield to forces beyond ourselves.
Giving up shows that we believe you are to be feared—Letting go shows that we trust in you and that we know you care for us.

All this we declare in Jesus’ name. Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Eternal God, we have praised you in melody and song, giving thanks for all that you have given to us - far more than the riches and honor and understanding that Solomon received. For you gave us the gift of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Accept and bless these gifts and our lives as we offer them as our grateful response. May our lives be devoted to giving thanks to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.
Since World War Two, every Christian denomination has established an on-going process of publishing new hymnals. Hymnals used to last decades, but, today, they seem to become outdated with each new fad or trend.

Hymnal committees used to be comprised of the most prominent church musicians and the most astute biblical scholars and theologians. That is certainly not the case today. As a result, the choices of hymns in most of the newest editions of hymnals have more to do with church politics than with music or poetry or theology.

Nearly every hymnal committee during the past fifty years has struggled with the choice to include or not to include the hymn, "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Why? Well, the reasons are intuitively obvious to us Baby Boomers. Since World War Two, the main warfare has been cold, and the main struggle has been to maintain peace. Yes, there was the Korean War, and our nation seemed to be fairly united in that conflict. But, then there was the Vietnam War, which divided our nation, because as many condemned it as unnecessary as promoted it as necessary. Many people of my generation had conflicting convictions during our maturing years. The flower children might have been more convincing if they could have maintained some degree of sobriety, and the war mongers on draft boards might have been more convincing if they, in their sobriety, had been more compassionate as they dealt with the future well-being of the next generation.

As a result of all this, during the 60s and 70s, in particular, hymnal committees asked themselves, “Are the issues raised by ‘Onward, Christian Soldiers’ appropriate imagery for Christian hymnody?” “No!” was the resounding answer. “Throw it out,” they insisted!

"We can't throw out," said the opposition who were not only raised with it, but had also raised their children with it. “We’ll sing it anyway," they shouted.

"Well, they can sing it if they want to, but it doesn't belong in a hymnal."

"Well then, what about Charles Wesley's famous hymn, 'Soldiers of Christ, Arise.' That will have to go also."

"No. We can't exclude that," said the Methodists, in deference to the brother of John Wesley. Most denominations tried to eliminate both hymns during the past decades, only to reinstate them in the next edition of their hymnals for political reasons. Of course, the shame of church politics is the same shame of other politics, as no one is ever happy,
because the goal of most politics is to upset the least number of people instead of pleasing anyone.

I will admit that I have not even tried to keep up with the contents of new hymnal editions, but I do remember at one point in my ministerial career, that most hymnals excluded "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and "Soldiers of Christ, Arise." The Methodists did retain "Soldiers of Christ, Arise," but with only three of the original sixteen verses. And I think it is particularly interesting to note that the pacifist Mennonites also retained "Soldiers of Christ, Arise."

Well, I should soon get off my stump. But, let me use my introduction to lead us to some of the underlying questions that have been at the foundation of the struggle I just outlined.

Most of us are not pacifists. I have tried to be a pacifist. I would like to be one. I have preached in Quaker meeting houses, and I have enjoyed the company of Quakers very much. Perhaps some of you enjoy the company of your Mennonite neighbors.

Perhaps we all try to be pacifists in our thought and conduct, because we were brought up to value humbleness in order to avoid the sin of pride, but we also know that Christianity is not a peaceful "opiate for the people."

We live in a real world. And the symbols of warfare fascinate us because we know for sure that there is a constant battle of spiritual warfare within us as individuals, within our communities, and within nations. This is not a battle of the spiritual against the material. If we should all become monks and live in monasteries the battle will not end. If we should all become Puritans, the battle will not end.

Why? Because the battle is not just a battle of right against wrong. It is not just a battle of truth against falsehood. And, we have certainly outgrown the Medieval concept of battling against devils and demons. After all, if the battle is only between God and the devil, then how are we to be anything more than mere spectators?

And yet, do we not, all of us, dread evil in this world, and the inescapable power of evil? What has our Christian experience taught us about this battle?

As we try to answer this question, Paul's words become very important. We need the whole armor of God, not just a few pieces, because the battle that goes on around the world is also a battle that goes on within each of us.

Where does evil begin? Well, where does sin begin? What is the root of all evil? Where is the beginning of all sin?

Sin is not mere ignorance. Sin is not weakness. Sin is not yielding to temptations of the senses. The roots of sin all go down to that one basic sin that is so basic, and most of us ignore it--THE SIN OF PRIDE.
No power on earth has ever stood up to it. From the battlefields of every war, to our own conflicting thoughts, there is a real warfare being waged constantly, and the old hymns of battle, like "Soldiers of Christ Arise, and Put Your Armor On," still make sense.

Since Medieval times, when a person sneezes, if there is anyone else in the room, what does the bystander often say? BLESS YOU! WHY? This was a Medieval practice to remind people that there are things out of our control. It was thought in ancient times, that since one lost control when one sneezed, it was necessary for someone else to ask for God's blessing on behalf of that person, instantly, so that the devil could not get into the person while he or she was incapacitated.

The fact is, that most of our lives are beyond the control of our conscious personalities. Therefore, says Paul, we need the whole armor of God, not just a few pieces.

According to a believer like Paul, whether you are a pacifist or one who believes that military conflict is often necessary for the good, your ideals do not matter. Modern people, especially since World War Two, have trusted ideals as the prime agents of salvation. We have heard this again and again--if we just believe in peace there will be peace.

Paul reminds us, that even our highest ideals are not armor against the demons of this world. Ideals are man-made. They are nothing more than idols.

We need real armor for the battle of life.
We need faith itself.
We need truth.
We need salvation, the Spirit, the word of God.
We need the whole armor of God.

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Proper 16
Date: 27 August 2000
Title: “Armor for Life’s Battles”
Text: Ephesians 6:10-20

All of us are familiar with the story of David and Goliath. At one point in the story, David was asked to put on Saul’s armor before he went up against the giant Philistine. David tried to wear the armor, but it was so overly large for him and so heavy, that he fell over. He took that armor off and left it, and went with his slingshot before the giant, and everyone thought that he was crazy. But David knew that it was not Saul’s armor that would deliver him safely from the battlefield.
In what kind of armor do we choose to put our faith? What are the things that we take up for the battle of life: a bunch of adult armor plate, or a couple of small, smooth stones from our childhood? What do we put on to impress ourselves? What do we put on to impress our neighbors? What do we put on to impress God? Do we just try the pants on to see if they fit? A glove? Do we try the armor on piece by piece, just to get a taste of it? Is that how we handle life’s battles, sort of half-heartedly - just going through the motions? How are we supposed to suit up for the Christian journey that we all walk?

One can seek to make things such as truth, righteousness, the Gospel of peace, and faith, a permanent part of who we are, so that we need not put on some of the things that we have put on in the past, but we need to put on that which will make us ready - ready to receive God's help in our lives. We need to put on the armor that will get God’s work done. And God’s work is not simple.

So today’s lesson challenges us not to take such a matter lightly, because we simply cannot wear just one piece of armor; we need to suit-up in the whole thing.

When I was an undergraduate, my favorite author was J.R.R. Tolkien who wrote a book called *The Hobbit*. If you have not read it, you should give it a try, or you should at least read it to your grandchildren. Tolkien describes the great dragon named Smaug. He tells the story of how the little Hobbit named Bilbo sneaks down a passageway to observe this great dragon. Bilbo wants to see what the Hobbits can do to remedy the situation of this dragon terrorizing the countryside. Appealing to the dragon's sense of pride, the dragon rolls upon his back and shows the armor he is so proud of to the Hobbit, and Bilbo observes one little scale that is missing, one little piece of the great Smaug’s defense system that is missing - one chink in his armor. And it is enough to do in the mighty Smaug.

Paul tells us that we cannot just wear a helmet of salvation, or a belt of truth, or shoes to proclaim the gospel of peace, or simply carry with us the Word of God like a sword, or wear a breastplate of righteousness. We must put on the whole armor of God. We must use all the resources that are available to us, that come from God and that come from the Community of Faith. If there is one chink missing, we risk failure. "Therefore take up the whole armor of God so that you might be able to withstand on that evil day,” writes Paul. “And having done everything, stand firm." For you see, in life, we really do not struggle against the things that can be protected by a breastplate of iron, or a sword of steel, or a helmet of leather, or a cellular phone, or a checkbook, or a gun. Our greatest struggle is to protect ourselves from the things that attack our spirit. When THEY attack, we need the WHOLE armor of God, not just a piece of it.

So, put on the whole armor of God!

PASTORAL PRAYER

We confess, O God, our involvement with the evil influences of our present age. They lower the standard of people's lives and damage our ability to experience lives shaped
and filled with love, justice and mercy. People suffer today when their lives are dominated and restricted by people who exercise power in inappropriate ways - in families, in society, in politics, and even in church structures. People suffer today when they believe that love has to be earned or when they have come to believe that their value rests solely in terms of what they can produce. People suffer today when they are denied work or acceptance because of their race or gender or age or appearance. Therefore, precious Lord, we pray that you will strengthen us with your Holy Spirit that we may withstand both the spiritual and physical forces of evil that can influence us personally, as members of both this community of faith and the larger communities in which we live. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Gracious God, you hold us firm through the power of your Spirit, and in Jesus Christ you make clear that you withhold nothing from us. You offer us strength to withstand all that threatens to weaken our faith and our witness. Bless these gifts and our lives, which we offer in response to your great gifts to us. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Proper 17  
Date: 30 August 1997  
Title: "The Language of Intimate Friendship"  
Text: Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Even in our country, where, in order to communicate, people usually speak in English, they yet speak in different languages. Young people, especially teenagers, speak in their own language. There is the language of the business world. There is the language of the insurance and investment community. There is the language of preachers, of farmers and bankers; of easterners, southerners, northerners, Midwesterners, westerners, south westerners, and Californians. There is a language we use with young infants. And, there is a language of love, is there not? I am certain that most of us here this morning have our own language for intimate moments with those whom we adore.

I recall an especially tender expression, which I learned in my high school French class. It was supposed to be something that romantic young French men would say to the young women they were trying to woo: “Ah, mon petite chou chou”. It sounds so sweet and tender - the true language of romantic love. It means, literally, "my little cabbage head."

The first lesson this morning addresses the language of love and describes a springtime courtship. Why this lesson was not included in a springtime selection of scripture lessons I do not know. It is very compelling. It is very passionate, and very tender. Perhaps it is too passionate for spring, but emotionally manageable after a long boring summer?

Why is this passionate book in the Bible? Evidently the early Christians had no problem
with including this book in the Christian Bible. Centuries later, however, as denial became more than a river in Egypt, the passionate love language of the Song of Songs became, more and more, an embarrassment to Christians, until, during the Victorian age, the only commentary on this book was apologetic.

Well, explained the Victorians, the biblical text, which says this and that, must mean only that and so, because, since it is in the Bible, it cannot possibly mean what it actually says.

Is the "Song of Songs" only a secular love poem? No! If it were, it would not be in the Bible. Therefore, let us consider the literature, and the language, and the underlying theology of this love poem.

All of us use different languages, as I have already cited. At work we use a certain language. At home we use another. At church we use another. We use a different language with friends from the language we use with strangers. With babies, with teenagers, with young adults, with middle-aged people, with old people (and then the cycle starts over again as we might, unfortunately, use baby language with the elderly), we use different languages.

This whole matter is rather confusing, perhaps, but that is my point. Love sometimes seems to be so distant, and yet, love is so commonplace. Does not everyone yearn to be loved? But, look at what modern society is doing to love. There are people in our society who would like to return to the mock modesty of Victorian England, with its prudish cloaking of everything sexual, when the word ―sex,‖ and all it implies, was hush-hush; when it was more polite to speak of a "limb" than of a "leg."

People today are almost schizophrenic when it comes to talking about sex. Wherever we go we might need to ask ourselves if the people in the same room are Neo-Victorians, or are they part of the new age of frank and statistical disclosure? Sometimes we are not sure, so we just keep our mouths shut.

Each generation seems to have its problems with this topic. In 1944 C. S. Lewis wrote: "They'll tell you sex has become a mess because it was hushed up. But, for the last twenty years it has not been hushed up…. Yet it is still a mess. If hushing up had been the cause of the trouble, ventilation would have set it right, but it hasn't."

So, why is this poem in the Bible? Well, why not! The Bible states that God loves us, and we are to love God unconditionally and our neighbors as ourselves. If this is true, then the language of love is not meant to be sustained only by lovers? The language of love is not limited to the description of physical pleasures. The language of love involves the entire person: mind, body and spirit. It is not a language of domination, but of intimate friendship.

Therefore, the language of love may be the language of lovers for practical purposes. It may also be the language of enlightened people who live in an age of political correctness. We all want to be practical. We want to be pragmatic. But we want also to be
people who think and act and speak in ways that are acceptable to the people around us. The language of love reminds us that all of us can do these things, because God loves us. And God's love is not distinct from God. God is the source of all loving, and those whom God loves, God calls friends, not servants. The master has become the friend, and, the language of love reminds us of this.

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Proper 18  
Date: 07 September 1997  
Title: “Evaluating Persons” (incomplete)  
Text: James 2  

“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

It could just be me, but I would have to think that I am not alone as I conclude that the scripture selections in the lectionary for this Sunday, are more than coincidental as they comment on the events of the past week, especially the international event of Diana Spencer's death, and the death of Mother Teresa—two of the most recognizable women in the world.

This has been a difficult week for me as far as organizing my time has been concerned. I have had my work to do, and I have this ministry, and I am also part of a family with traditions and with a history. Part of that history harks back to my youth when my great grandmother would spend time telling my younger brother and me about our family history.

I never knew my great grandfather, but my great grandmother lived until I was in junior high school. Both my great grandfather and my great grandmother were the first members of their families to be born in the USA. Nevertheless, Great Grandmother was still very British. Britain was not just Britain to her; it was GREAT Britain. She wore clothing not unlike what the Queen Mother, who is 97, wears today. She wore buttoned shoes, gray silk stockings—even in the summer, long dresses, fancy hats, and a gold tipped ebony cane, which she leaned upon in order to bend down toward my brother and me who were usually seated on the carpet in front of her when she started one of her long stories concerning the history of the Mowbray family. The family history is rather well documented. Much of it is hand written on a long parchment document, which hangs in my family home in New Jersey.

As I have studied my family history, however, most of it is rather dismaying. There is virtually nothing recorded about what anyone did. All of it is a kind of Who's Who, which, of course, comments rather poignantly on the lessons appointed for this Sunday, especially the second chapter of James, and upon the history-making events of this past week. Without works, a person’s faith, a person’s name, and everything else about the person, is very dead.
Mother Teresa’s work is well known throughout the world, but what did Diana Spencer do? Surely, the British, along with people around the world, mourn not the life of a spoiled little girl who was very immature when she married at the tender age of 19, and might have become the queen of England, but did not. They instead mourn someone who matured into a person with a great sensitivity to the needs of people, especially the ill, the disabled, and those who are threatened by violence.

Such matters should matter to us all, because, we know for sure, that, what we become by what we do, is far more important than what anyone else has planned for us.

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Proper 19  
Date: 14 September 1997  
Title: “The Tongue’s Capacities”  
Text: James 3

No matter what we think, no matter what we do, what we say can make us or break us. We can tame our thinking, and we can tame our actions, but can we tame the tongue?

I have often wondered about the meaning of the expression - and how old could the expression be - "bite your tongue?" Of course, most of us, most of the time, probably just bite our tongues when we are eating. Surely, there are times when it would be advisable not to bite the tongue to injure it but to simply keep it still. As the letter of James puts it, "...every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue...." These words from the second lesson are not very flattering, but they seem to comment honestly on the condition of humanity in this world.

How do we tame the tongue?

Do you remember John Moshitta, Jr.? In the early 1980s, John became known as the world's fastest talker. He did a TV advertisement for American Express in 1983. His stellar performance was at the Oscar Awards presentation that year, when he recited all of the Academy Award rules in fifteen seconds. He, instantaneously, became famous. Of course, the media were immediately interested in John's talents, and they quizzed him continually. "How did you learn to say things so quickly," they asked?

"Well," confessed John, after being hammered by the press for several weeks, "I practice a great deal." "One of my exercises for speaking faster is:

Mama's a mean mama;  
Daddy's a dear daddy;  
Baby's a bad baby.
You need to be able to say this twenty times in a row, very fast."

John's advice was advice concerning the control of the tongue. Obviously, the technique he used to train himself was one that trained his tongue to say only what he wanted it to say and only in the way that he wanted it to be said. It is no wonder that he was a celebrity. He had tamed his tongue.

[REPEAT exercise]

I do not think I can do that twenty times. Do you?

Most of us here this morning, probably never have the time to rehearse anything we say, however, some of us probably remember working on diction in drama class: "THUH rain in Spain, falls mainly on THUH plain." Inevitably, someone in the class would say, THUH rain in Spain falls mainly on the THEE plain."

"NO," the teacher would yell, "the long ‘ee’ sound is used only before a vowel, otherwise, you always use the ‘uh’ sound. THUH rain in Spain falls mainly on THUH plain." Most of you know that I grew up in New Jersey. All I could think of when I heard these words from my drama coach was a New Yorker saying, "DUH rain in Spain, falls mainly on DUH plain." Taming the tongue takes a lot of discipline, and a lot of practice.

Most of us, most of the time, do not rehearse what we say, because everyday life does not make that kind of a demand upon us. And yet, every time we open our mouths, we are dealing with the most precious thing in the world - the human personality. If we should not appreciate the fact that we are automatically offering our own personalities to the world every time we open our mouths, we should at least understand that we are, in our conversations, dealing with other human personalities.

No understanding, whether it is among heads of state or heads of households, can begin without an exchange of words. We refer to "Peace Talks." If people want peace, they first need to exchange words. If there are no words, there can be no plans for peace or for anything else that matters. Hot words can begin or inflame conflicts. Cool, calm words can bring comfort and peace. Words at solemn moments can inspire. It is difficult to imagine what may have happened after the Civil War battle at Gettysburg if President Lincoln had not uttered his famous address. Lincoln was heartbroken, but his words were a marvel of adequacy: "It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

And where might the British be today, without Winston Churchill's "blood, sweat and tears"?
Jesus advised his disciples, "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." Jesus' words are inspiring as well as cautioning.

Our words are far more than communication; they are signs of our personalities. Therefore, we must tame the tongue, and that takes discipline and practice.

Sticks and stones
May break my bones,
But words can never hurt me.

This is NOT true. The bruises from the stones will heal and so will the broken bones; the injuries from the words can last a lifetime. So, the saying might be, "talk is cheap," but the fact is that talk has more potential than anything else we do.

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Proper 20
Date: 21 September 1997
Title: “Gracious Acceptance”
Text: Proverbs 31:10-31

Last week we enjoyed a passage from Proverbs, which introduced the personification of Wisdom as a woman. She, Wisdom, calls to those who pass by in the market place. She is alive. She is a person with her own emotions. In last week's lesson, Lady Wisdom competes for the attention of the people, and is disgusted with the marginal role that she is allotted.

I have always enjoyed reading these passages from Proverbs, but I wonder how much a woman would enjoy them. How would the woman of today react to these words?

In today's lesson we are introduced to a superwoman. She makes her own clothes. She does all the cooking. She manages the household. She dabbles in real estate. She has an interest in commerce, is involved in manufacturing, and works in social services. She can handle unexpected tragedies such as snow in the desert. She is the power behind her husband's success. She possesses prophetic clairvoyance. She provides education for her children. She NEVER, or at least, seldom watches television. SHE IS THE PERFECT MOTHER AND WIFE. And finally, she goes to church regularly.

Truly, this is a list of qualifications for the contemporary woman, except, perhaps, for the last three or four. Generally, however, there is nothing that she can not do superbly all of the time and all at the same time. We might expect to find her featured in a lead article in Time magazine.
There is, of course, a larger setting of Proverbs 31. God reveals the will of God to us not just under extraordinary circumstances, but, most importantly, in our everyday activities and through all aspects of our lives. Yes, Lady Wisdom is Superwoman, she is supposed to be. But her “superwomaness” is illustrated in the most mundane ways possible, by listing specific activities that are done by real people in real situations, every day. The effect of these varied activities, however, when viewed collectively, is stunning.

I have often reflected upon my childhood memories of my mother. She still is a SUPERMOM to me. How she ever managed to do all the things she did and keep up with her career, as a female member of her generation, is amazing to me.

There are also, I am certain, “superhusbands,” and “superdads.” Truly, all we should need to do for the sake of each of us would be to list all our positive, impressive characteristics, while ignoring the negatives, and we would, inevitably, come up with a super person. Accentuate the positive; eliminate the negative, as the song goes, and even people like us can be super people.

In a larger context, we might also observe a pattern pertaining to all three lessons for this morning. James's letter is full of practical instructions. He does not say that if we live plan "A," we end up in God's good graces, but if we live plan “B,” we are going to go to hell. Instead, James argues, we need to realize that people lead different lifestyles because of the relationships they form with other people throughout their lives.

There is such a thing as plan "C." We are different, yes, but all of us have something in common. We all are to submit ourselves to God, who is good, and we all are to resist evil. "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you." This is, truly, good news to Christians. It is not threatening. It is promising. All we need to do is graciously accept this promise and the number of our positive characteristics will begin to accumulate. You see, says James, we humans are not just dumped in the world and left to our own devices. We have a companion. God is intimately involved in our living, and if we live faithfully in relationship to God, then we have the assurance that God draws near and nearer to us.

And, this leads us to the words of Jesus. Jesus asked his disciples to "follow" him, and all they could think of was greatness. Jesus called them to be his followers, and all they could think of was privilege and power and position. So, before we get carried away with denouncing the disciples, we might consider our reasons for following Christ.

The world we live in seems to be in love with itself. We must promote ourselves. To do otherwise is to show a lack of ambition, and that is an indication that we are not psychologically healthy in today's competitive world. REALLY?

Several years ago, a major protestant denomination conducted a nationwide poll of its church members. 90% of those who contributed toward their church's financial program expected something in return. What did they expect? Snappy, entertaining, short sermons. Rousing, entertaining music. Smooth pastoral calling. A full range of inspiring programs for the family. Only a few people, nationwide, checked anything on the survey sheet.
about service to others, AND NO ONE, not one member of a major protestant denomination, NOT ONE PERSON, among millions, checked anything on the survey sheet about human suffering and how to relieve it.

So, here is a question for you. How do we apply heavenly wisdom to our daily living? Well, how did Jesus apply heavenly wisdom toward daily living? He said, “If you want to be first, you are going to have to get used to being last.” And after he told his disciples that, he did a very odd thing. He placed a child before his disciples.

Today, most of us would probably miss this one. Today, children are considered naive, innocent, sweet, and trusting. This was not the general attitude toward children in Jesus’ day. Children then, as in most third world countries today, were thought of as nuisances to be disciplined and tolerated until they became old enough to be useful, reasonable adults. Why are there so many orphanages in poor countries? Because children are considered useless, and there is no profit in caring for them.

"Whoever welcomes one such child," said Jesus, "welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also the one who sent me." We learn here, as probably people like Mother Teresa learned, that none of us has any claim on God's generosity. Not one of us can do anything for God's benefit, and yet, it is the character of God to be generous.

How then do WE become great? There is only one way. We treat others as God treats them, and then we become great, because God is great.

Sewing, cooking, managing our households, conducting our everyday duties at home, going to work, improving the products that we manufacture, increasing the employment in our communities, helping to raise the standard of living, belonging to a service club, being ready to help when unexpected tragedies strike, being the power behind your spouse's success, making our houses homes for our children, worshipping regularly…. These mundane activities, viewed collectively, can be stunning.

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Proper 21 
Date: 28 September 1997  
Title: “Caring Connections”  
Text: James 5:13-20  

"Is any among you sick," asked James?  

Perhaps one of the basic differences in the realm of human thought that separates everything BC from AD is the human attitude toward the suffering and the sick. Before the days of the Great Physician, physical illness was believed to be evidence of divine punishment. People who were mentally ill where thought to be possessed by demons.
Since the days of the Jesus, the Great Physician, however, one of the characteristics of the Christian Church has been compassion toward the suffering and the sick.

Christians, today, who come down with a bad cold might admit to themselves that if they had just gotten enough sleep each night and not neglected taking their vitamins for the past two weeks, they may have avoided the cold. That, at least, places some blame on themselves instead of on God. But, it is not possible for Christians to remain faithful if they blame God for the cold, even if they regret something they did during the past week, and consider the cold to be a punishment.

Some people still think that way, and talk that way, but that is BC talk, not AD talk, and it has nothing whatever to do with the teachings or actions of the Great Physician. Jesus touched the physically ill and they were healed. He touched the mentally ill, and they were healed.

Remembering the life of a person like Mother Teresa, helps us recall the work of countless medical missionaries who have pioneered the creation of a new attitude toward the sick, and new methods and institutions for their cure. And, surely, we must realize that it has been under the influence of Christian ideals that medicine has made its greatest progress.

This brings us to an interesting point that James makes as he concludes his letter, about Christian compassion in the Christian Community, and the place of prayer. What binds together a community of faith? A life of prayer, writes James, more than anything else, is what unites such a community. Praying for one another? O.K! We can go along with that. We can do something for others that will not invade their privacy.

Our society demands this. Who am I to define what is best for others? Who am I to invade the privacy of others? Who am I to suggest to others the errors of their ways? We live private, sensitive lives wherein we seek to honor the freedom and the independence of others. The fact is we do not define the truth and we do not have the right to impose ourselves and our views on others. But, says James, as God's people, we live under the Lordship of God. Therefore, we are called to exercise Christian concern on every level. This is our responsibility. It is NOT our right. And here, of course, is the hook. If we can do nothing else, we can at least do this through prayer. Sometimes, however, something more than prayer needs to be done.

Recently I met a man at the hardware store in Charles City who lives down the road from an elderly woman who is suffering from Alzheimer disease. The man was trying to find some wood screws that cannot be removed once they are screwed in. I asked him what he needed them for. I was not ready for his story.

The old woman has two children who live not far away, but their only concern is inheriting her money and her farm. Fortunately, the old woman has a compassionate neighbor. Each morning he checks on the old woman. During the last cold spell, he had put in her storm windows and replaced the screen panels in her storm doors with the glass
ones. After several cool days, the weather became much warmer. So the old woman took out the glass panel from the back storm door and set it against the kitchen wall. She then unscrewed the storm door frame, and removed the door, frame and all. She then unscrewed the hinges of the back door, removed the door, pried off the moldings on the door, removed the glass from it, and neatly rested the glass plate against the panel from the storm door.

The next morning, her compassionate neighbor made his usual morning call. You can imagine, I am sure, his surprise when he went to knock on the back door. There was no back door, and no storm door. The old woman was in the door-less kitchen, dressed as if she were ready to go to church, in a nice dress with matching jewelry, as cordial as ever. After his gentle greetings, the man asked his neighbor about the door.

“What door?”

“The back door. And the storm door. What happened to them?” She did not know. “Did someone take them off, to repair them, or something?”

“No,” she said, “there has never been a door there.”

The man then noticed the two pieces of glass. "Where did these come from," he asked?

“What?”

“These pieces of glass.”

“Oh, they should go out to the barn.”

He did not bother to ask her again about the doors. Instead, he walked out through the open doorway and started to search for the missing doors. He searched all the buildings and found no sign of the doors. He then got in his truck and drove around the farm buildings and down a few lanes. It took quite a while, but eventually he discovered the two doors on the top of a heap of debris at the edge of a field a hundred yards or so from the house. He had no problem putting the storm door in this truck, but he had all he could do to put the heavy kitchen door in the truck.

Clearly, someone needs to invade someone's privacy here. But, who? Me? You? The compassionate neighbor? The woman's children?

A decade or so ago, my mother's younger sister became plagued with Alzheimer disease. My uncle could go along with the men she complained about one day who were having lunch in the trees in the front yard. He had successfully prevented the house from burning down one day when she put the automatic coffee maker on the gas-stove burner, as if it were an old fashioned percolator. But, eventually, he realized that unless he did something radically different for this person he loved, even though she often did not know who he was, both of their lives would be in danger.
There are times in our lives when prayer is not enough. When people cannot help themselves, those who can help, must. Yes, we must honor the freedom and independence of others, but not to the point of neglecting the obvious needs of others.

If we live next to a home where there is violence, spouse abuse, or child abuse, where the results of people’s actions are not only wrong but also illegal, our prayers are not enough. Sometimes, in order to honor the freedom and independence of others, we must invade the privacy of others in Christ’s name.

Christians are to live under the Lordship of God. We may have no right to exercise our Christian concerns, but we most certainly have the responsibility to do so.

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Proper 24
Date: 19 October 1997
Title: “When There Is Silence Between Heaven and Earth”
Text: Job 38:1-11

We have heard about the patience of Job. If we have read the book of Job, however, we realize that Job was not always patient. Job had suffered greatly, and innocently. Job’s friends were relentless in providing specific reasons for his suffering, most of which had to do with human limitations and wickedness. Throughout this exchange, Job resists the reasoning of his friends. When God finally enters the stage and we expect specific answers to the problem of innocent suffering, all we get is more questions from God: "Who are you?" "Who do you think you are?" "Where were you when I created the world," asks God?

Perhaps we can think of a time or two, when we thought we were making great progress as a “somebody” who was really doing something good for the sake of others, only to have someone from the opposition put us down with the words, "Well, who are you?" "Just who do you think you are?"

And think of the question, "Where were you when...?" People I have known have asked this question at various times. "Where were you when President Kennedy was shot?" I remember distinctly where I was. Where were YOU when President Kennedy was shot? Where were you when the first step was taken on the moon in 1969? I remember as if it were yesterday.

Most of us can answer such questions precisely. And no matter what we offer as an answer, there isn't much that anyone can do to correct us, because we are simply reporting. But, what would we do with the question from God, "Where were you when I created the earth?"
Job had suffered so much. His friends had been relentless in providing specific reasons for his suffering. But Job resists their reasoning. It is as if Job's friends might have been saying things like, "Well, Job, if you hadn't smoked all your life, you wouldn't have gotten lung cancer." Or, "You know Job, if you had watched your diet more carefully and didn't consume so much salt and fat, you wouldn't have had that heart attack."

Then Job replies, “But I've never smoked, and I've always watched my diet, and I exercise every day.”

The ancient story of Job is one of the oldest stories in the Bible, and it is very interesting. Most of the story takes place on two levels. First, there is the talk on earth between Job and his friends. Second, there is the talk going on in heaven. Meanwhile, there is a great silence between heaven and earth. When God breaks the silence, there are no answers, just more questions. "Who are you?" and "Where were you when I created the world," asks God?

This raises the question, “Does God address anything of importance with regard to the innocent sufferer?”

We might also ask ourselves, “Is this some kind of a filibuster?” We know what a filibuster is, especially from the antics of members of congress. A filibuster is a blustery attempt to talk around an issue, using the power of language to overwhelm and exhaust the opposition. Is that what God is doing here--trying to overwhelm and exhaust Job?

“Who are you, Job, and where were you when I created the world?”

If we back up through the story, however, we will find that in Job's early speeches he has already listed most of the content of God's divine speech. For instance, in chapter 26, Job tells Bildad that God created the earth. Job already knew these things. Also, at the very beginning of the story, God boasts about Job and Job's goodness, which implies a certain degree of independence on Job's part. And God is very independent.

Job is discussing certain human things on earth. God is discussing certain heavenly things in heaven. There is a great deal of chattering going on--on earth as it is going on in heaven. But there is also a great silence--a silence between heaven and earth.

How then do we deal with the problem of this innocent sufferer? Did God have a motive in this drama? One suspects, that if God did have a motive, God would have become one of Job's friends.

Should God account for Job's suffering? Well, God does not, whether we think God should or not. Therefore, questions such as, “Does God cause suffering?” or “Does God will suffering?” are not appropriate questions here. Job's friends tried to account for Job's suffering. God does not. So who is helping whom in this story?
First of all, we cannot help but notice that Job does not blame God for what happened to Job. Instead, in spite of all his friends' good advice, Job trusts God's motive. Job also demands God's presence even when Job is suffering unjustly. So who is helping whom here?

Ironically, it turns out that Job helps God. It is Job's integrity in a situation of innocent suffering that helps God control the chaos of our created world. This is, according to this ancient tale, one of the primary ways that we humans aid God. Our integrity, in each and every situation, helps us to help God control the chaos around us.

We, all of us, from time to time, suffer, but it is not the result of any divine motive. It can't be. We are human. We are a part of creation. We are mortal. Therefore, our prayer might be, “Take my life, and let it be consecrated. Take my whole life—all of it. Take my hands, take my feet, take my voice, take my lips, take my silver and my gold, take my love, take my whole self, **even my sufferings.** Take it all, and I will be, ever, only, all for Thee. Amen.”

[Precede or follow this sermon by singing the hymn, “Take my life, and let it be Consecrated,” by Frances Ridley Havergal, 1874.]

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Proper 25  
Title: “The Last Miracle”  
Text: Mark 10:46-52  

Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Mark 10:51 (NRSV)

Amidst the fast-moving events in Mark's Gospel, the healing of Bartimaeus at the end of Jesus' amazing tour southward through Galilee, gets our attention in a startling and refreshing way. This is the second blind man healed by Jesus in as many chapters. Immediately before this healing, he unstopped the ears of a deaf man. Before coming to Jericho, he cured an epileptic boy brought before him by his disciples. Jesus has had a full schedule, to say the least.

As Mark's readers and hearers, our agility and endurance are put to the test. Then comes the redoubled cry of a blind beggar named Bartimaeus: "Son of David, have mercy on me!" The NRSV translation of Mark 10:49, states that "Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’"

Well, there has to be something inside of us that is relieved, finally, to have Jesus stop and allow us to catch up with him, and to glimpse a moment of stillness after so much movement and upheaval.
Although contrary to the wishes of the crowds, Jesus stops deliberately. We sense that the disciples knew Timaeus’s son as something of a public nuisance, undeserving of their teacher’s attention, but Jesus stops anyway. And we stop with him. And we wait for Bartimaeus to state his case before this fast-moving rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth.

This is not just another anonymous, handicapped person who has stopped Jesus dead in his tracks. This man has a name. He is "Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, a blind beggar." Unlike the blind man in Mark 8:22 whom "some people brought to [Jesus]," Bartimaeus petitions Jesus very directly, even volubly, entirely on his own behalf.

"What do you want me do for you?" Jesus asks him.

Bartimaeus wastes no time replying, "My teacher, let me see again."

Likewise, there is a "straightaway" quality to Bartimaeus's recovery. There is no pulling him aside, no waiting around. "Immediately," the last verse tells us, "he regained his sight and followed him on the way." His sight restored, Bartimaeus follows. He abandons his roadside begging and becomes a disciple. There is nothing cautious about the healing. Jesus doesn't adjure him to "tell no one." Bartimaeus simply follows Jesus, heedlessly, one thinks, ecstatically, to Jerusalem. And once again Jesus and the Twelve, their numbers increasing, are "on their way."

This is certainly NOT a story about the way most people, even people of faith, see things new or differently. But such things can happen.

Not long ago I read of a graduate school student in Pittsburgh who was looking for a part-time job. A newspaper listed an administrative position with a soup kitchen. That looked interesting, so she clipped it and prepared for the interview. On the day of her interview, she put on a dark blue business suit, put together a manila folder full of resumes and references, and clipped back her hair. Arriving a few minutes before noon, she saw a sign that read, "East End Cooperative Ministry." She knocked on the door. Someone inside said, "It's unlocked." She went in, only to find a long line of people in front of her. Disappointment washed over her. Then she realized it was lunchtime. The people in the line were not there for the same interview; they were waiting for soup. She grew nervous as she looked at the people in the line. Some of them, in turn, looked at her. She felt self-conscious about the way she was dressed. Apparently others began to sense her anxiety. A woman in a moth-eaten sweater smiled and tried to make conversation. "Is this your first time here?"

"Yes, it is."

"Don't worry," said the woman in the sweater, "it gets easier."

"The scales fell from my eyes that day," reflected the young woman. "I went there looking for a job, and that woman thought I was there for soup. As far as she knew, the world had been as cruel to me as it was to her. But in the kindest way she could, she
welcomed me as a fellow human being. She saw me as someone equally in need, which I was and still am. I didn't realize it at the time, but that was the day when God began to convert me.”

That young woman met the Christ in others, and her life was changed. As a result, the rest of her story is even more amazing. With the help of Presbyterian mission money, she went on after graduate school to found a halfway house for women who are recovering drug addicts. You see, her life changed completely that day. She was greatly blessed, to the point that nothing ever looked the same again.

Bartimaeus had an opportunity to meet Christ, and he took advantage of it. As a result, Bartimaeus was greatly blessed. And, you and I have the same privilege, of meeting Christ as we deal with others in our daily lives. Let us always take advantage of such opportunities as they are presented to us, so that our lives may also be blessed.

Let us pray.
Lord, help us to see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, even in the midst of a large, probably noisy crowd, your son Jesus heard Bartimaeus’s cries for mercy and healing, and helped him move from blindness to sight. The crowd and the attempt by some to silence Bartimaeus did not distract Jesus from responding to the needs of a blind beggar. This interruption to his journey provides an example of the life you call us to live as Christ’s disciples. The question, however, disturbs us - would we have been among those who called out for Bartimaeus to be quiet? Forgive us, Lord, if we find interruptions to our plans a source of irritation rather than an opportunity for serving others in Christ’s name. Bartimaeus's desperation and cry for mercy is echoed in the lives of many people in our own communities and throughout the world. Forgive us, Lord, if we close our ears and our hearts to these cries. Remind us that following in the way of Christ means responding to those who cry for mercy. Immediately, Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus. The way to discipleship is entered when our eyes are graciously opened to see and to follow Christ in faith. Forgive us, Lord, when we find excuses to delay responding to your call to discipleship. Enlighten our minds with your wisdom, O Lord, and imprint the image of your love once more on our hearts so that we can focus anew on your presence and your power whenever and wherever you call us to serve people in Christ’s name. Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Gracious and merciful God, we offer these gifts and our lives in response to the blessings we receive as followers of Jesus, your Son, and our Lord. Empower us with your Spirit to hear those who cry out for mercy that we may be loving, and committed bearers of the gospel in word and in deed. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.
All Saints Sunday
Date: 02 November 1997
Title: “The Company of Heaven” (incomplete)

Halloween, All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day, All Souls Day, All Saints Sunday, Reformation Sunday, Reformation Day. All of these occur within a week, and are celebrated by different denominations in different ways. HMMMM! This morning, I would like to take a few moments to bring the blur into focus.

Between Nashua and Charles City, there is cemetery along Route 218. During the past week I noticed that some of the graves were decorated with Halloween decorations. I do not think that I have ever seen such a thing before. As I drove past that cemetery last week, I thought, there is a sermon here.

Halloween used to be spelled with a hyphen between the two e's, thus, Halloween, is an abbreviation for Hallow Even, or Hallow Eve, which is an abbreviation for All Hallows Even. All Hallows is another name for All Saints Day. Hallow means, "holy," as in "hallowed be thy name,” thus All Hallows means all holy ones, hence saints, hence All Saints.

Surely, this is an interesting time of the year. Days grow short. We set our clocks back, making the darkness appear earlier. The trees that were briefly wrapped in glory quickly become barren. Some nights we hear geese honking high overhead, amazingly navigating by the light of the moon. Then comes the morning that we wake up to discover the tomatoes and geraniums and zucchini have been reduced to frosted slime. Put it all together, and one instinctively thinks about death or even about the end of the world.

The Christian Church thinks of these "last things" often throughout the autumn. During such times it is natural for the faithful to remember saints and angels to calm our fears. We, too, like the faithful departed who have gone before us, have been commissioned to struggle for justice, to announce good news, to heal the sick, to guide the young. Who else would better know how to drive away the darkness than the souls of the faithful departed in heaven?

Perhaps a fresh look at some of our Halloween traditions may offer some new insights for this time of year. An American tradition on the Eve of All Saints Day is to carve a pumpkin into a grinning lantern. It is set by the front door as a sign of hospitality to strangers. It is not there to scare anyone, or to scare away ghosts. Who knows who may enter on Halloween? An old Irish song tells us, "So oft, oft, oft goes Christ in a stranger's guise."
According to ancient Christian tradition, offering hospitality to guests, (and that includes trick-or-treaters), is one way to experience a foretaste of that great day when the Lord Jesus will open the doors of heaven and welcome us home.

When worn in the right spirit, the costumes of All Hallows Eve can be a way of acting out the promise of the Beatitudes, which was our Gospel lesson for the morning: Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the lowly.

One of these days our troubles and sorrows will fall away, like discarded masks, and we will see ourselves as we really are: the beloved children of God, home at last in the good company of heaven.

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Proper 27  
Date: 09 November 1997  
Title: “Mighty Fine Financial Transactions”  
Text: Mark 12:38-44

Jesus’ teaching about the poor widow is a picture lesson. I am certain that most of us probably picture this scene when we hear or read this story. What do you see? The point of the story about the poor widow is plainly made by Jesus. Surely it is very plain when we contrast the picture of the poor widow with the picture that we might draw in our minds of the posturing and pompous practices of the scribes. If, however, we take only the story about the poor widow without contrasting it to any other story, this story of selfless devotion may be more difficult to illustrate, because the problem here is the genuine modesty of the poor woman’s devotion.

From my experiences with people of different lands and different ethnic groups, as well as with people from different areas of this country, I would have to say that neither the poor nor the rich have a monopoly on modesty. I have met too many well-to-do people who have given nothing to their church or to anyone else, unless they could make a big impressive scene about it.

And the poor? So many times the attitude of the least among us has been, "Let those give who can afford it." There also seems to be a mutual low point about giving, where both rich and poor try to justify the withholding of their gifts. The well off might reason, "Well, until the church decides to do something really showy--something I like--my five bucks a week should be enough." And the poor might easily reason, "I really don't have a penny to spare." Those at both extremes and all of us in between can easily lapse into the attitude of "No one will ever notice." These are reasoned justifications, but they take on the form of excuses more than the form of reasons, and we all know that excuses are the shabbiest of defenses.
When I was teaching English in a college in Illinois, one of my assignments to the first year students who were taking the Writing and Rhetoric course, was a short essay that would illustrate the difference between a reason and an excuse. The assignment provided not only the opportunity to compare and illustrate, but also an opportunity for me to impress upon my students, very early in the semester, that I was willing to reason with them, but that I had no intention of dealing with their excuses for not getting their assignments done on time.

During my second year of teaching, one of my students was absent when the essay was due. The next week he walked into class and presented to me his overdue assignment as well as the assignment that was currently due. As he stood in front of me on two feet, a perfect specimen of health and vigor, he said, "The reason why the last assignment is late is that I broke my leg last week." He had no crutches, no cast, and he looked just fine to me. I said nothing, waiting to find out what the joke was. He looked at me with a smile, and continued, "I think this is a reason and not just an excuse. You see,” he said, as he raised up his pant leg, "I was on my way to my first afternoon class last week, when I slipped on some wet leaves and fell down a couple of steps. I landed on my right knee, and my leg broke. So, I couldn't walk the rest of the afternoon. Therefore, I could not get to your class."

His right leg was a prosthesis. I had no idea that the young man had an artificial leg. He continued, "I'm sure glad I didn't fall on the other knee, or I probably wouldn't be here today, either." Another student, who was standing nearby, joked that when Tony broke a leg he went over to the industrial arts shop instead of to the hospital. Tony did not need to make up an excuse; he needed no justification for what happened because there was an obvious reason why he could not get to class that day.

Many people, however, go through life with poor excuses and with very shabby defenses. When Jesus recognized the greatness of the widow's gift, he really knocked over all the shabby defenses that people make.

Gifts of love are nothing more than gifts of love, and nothing less than exactly that. No gift of love is too small to count, and no life can be excused from the grace and duty of sharing. Nothing escapes the notice of the God from whom no secret is hid. To be a Christian is to wear the name of Christ. If that name is a valid identification, then our lives will testify to the Lordship of Christ, even at the level of material things. This is what freedom in Christ means.

We hear a lot about freedom in this country. We talk a lot about individual rights, and we say that we should be free to do this and that, which often translates into, "We ought to be free to do whatever we please," which of course easily translates into expressions of nothing more than selfishness and greed. In contrast, the poor widow was truly free: she was free in relation to God. She was free from fear in the face of this world's realities, and she was free for unbridled generosity in response to the goodness of God. And she needed no excuses.
INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

In the first lesson, Ruth claims the Levirate right of redemption from Boaz. The Levirate law required that a man marry the wife of his deceased brother for the purpose of having children in order to carry on the family name. In other words, in the time of Ruth, the responsibility to redeem a family was limited to brothers. As we approach the season of Advent and the birth of Jesus, who was of the lineage of David, we will probably understand the importance of this lesson to Christians.

Psalm 127 is a wisdom poem about establishing a family.

The second lesson focuses on the superior sacrifice of Christ, which is the foundation of the new covenant of God with humanity.

The gospel lesson recalls Jesus’ teaching in the Temple area after Jesus established his abilities in theological give-and-take. These stories are the final installment in Mark's account of the public ministry of Jesus.

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Proper 28
Date: 16 November 1997
Title: “To Be Steadily Ready”
Text: Mark 13:1-8

People can get very busy this time of year, because there are so many important things to do. Are you having company for Thanksgiving? Is the house clean; is the menu planned? Have you completed your Christmas shopping?

Wouldn't it be great if we were always ready for everything? Wouldn't it be amazing if we were always ready for the most important things in life?

The boy scouts have a motto to remind them to be steadily ready: "BE PREPARED!" I know, through my informal association with the Boy Scout troop in Nashua, because of my work with a Sea Explorer group, that each year the scouts spend a great deal of time preparing for their summer camping trip.

Last summer they spent two weeks in the rugged wilderness of the Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico, the most famous Scouting landmark. Every scout who wanted to go to this premier high-adventure base, was required to pass certain merit badges in order to qualify for the trip, and the adult leaders had to meet certain qualifications such as certified emergency medical training. They, scouts and adult leaders, spent nearly a year preparing for the trip.
I wonder, sometimes, how much time and effort most of us spend preparing for life. Life, too often, is treated as if it were just one darn thing after another. We get up each morning, go to work, come home, prepare and eat a meal, watch TV or read, go to bed, and the next day we do it all over again. And what happens on the weekend? We get up, go to work around the house, or around the yard, clean up, prepare and eat an evening meal, watch TV or read after supper, go to bed....

And then there is Sunday, which is a change of pace for some people. Why do Christians go to church on Sunday? There are many reasons, but certainly one of them is to prepare themselves for the things in life that really matter.

If we reflect back through our lives, we can probably recall a number of times when we worked very hard to get ready for something. We worked at our education in order to be better prepared for whatever work opportunities were before us. Many of us can remember preparing for our wedding day, and preparing for the birth of our first child. Many of us are planning or have already spent quite a bit of time and effort preparing for retirement. Yes, most of the events of our lives may just seem to have happened while we were making other plans, but we also know that we have occasionally made real plans, so that we would be prepared. As large plan-able events approached, we got ready and we stayed ready, and the better we prepared for each event, the better prepared we were for the next one. The less we prepared as we went along, the more alarmed we became with each new experience.

I remember a guy who was stationed with me at the Naval Facility on the NATO base in Iceland. He and his wife were expecting their first child. They prepared themselves intensely, taking Lamaze classes, practicing the breathing techniques daily, reading everything they could get their hands on. Two months before the child was born, the father-to-be told all his neighbors in the enlisted quarters to please never park in the space in front of his door, because he needed to keep his car in that spot. He got the car tuned up. He made sure the gas tank was always full and had a certain percentage of isopropyl alcohol in it, so that it would start even in the coldest weather. He cleaned the car inside and out. He would come home from work, and back the car into the parking spot, so that it would always be ready. In the front hall, next to the door, was a suitcase stuffed with everything on the Lamaze check off list: lollipops, lip balm, bed cloths; you name it, it was in that bag. On top of the bag was the prescribed extra pillow. He planned the route to the base hospital very carefully, and drove there several times, with a stopwatch. This guy was prepared!

One night his wife woke him out of a sound sleep, and said, "Honey, this it."

"Honey," he said, half asleep, "did you time the contractions."

"Just get me to the hospital," she replied.

He sprang into action, through on his cloths, ran out the front door and started the car. Ran back into the house, put on his coat, grabbed the bag by the door and the pillow,
dashed out the door and into the car that was warmed up and headed out on the planned route. As he approached the only traffic light on the base, the light turned red. He said to himself, "Should I go through it, or stop? I better stop!" So, he stopped. As he sat there waiting for the light to change, a strange, horrifying feeling raced through his body, as if he had forgotten something really important. HE HAD FORGOTTEN HIS WIFE.

Yes, he was prepared. His timing was flawless. But, was he ready? Not really!

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus insists that believers are not to be merely concerned with timing. As a licensed securities dealer, I can relate to this. If a person really wants to lose money in the stock market, they should just try what investors call “timing.” Timing is not a way to invest in the future of the stock market. Timing is gambling.

The advice Jesus gives his disciples in the gospel lesson is very important to anyone who invests in anything. Instead of becoming preoccupied with the moment of the end, people who invest in the future, including believers, are to be aware of the danger of being led astray in the time prior to the end. This is part of being steadily ready.

We are not concerned with timing here, because the time of the end is unknown, whether it is the end of an investment in money, or the end of an investment in life. Instead, we are to be steadily ready for God. The point is clear, and most of us have already experienced its clarity: life is difficult, and bad things happen even to the best of us, but there is always hope, and hope has nothing whatever to do with timing.

As we approach the season of Advent, it is especially appropriate for us to remember these messages, and especially the words of our Lord. Watch, wait, hope, be on guard, be alert, be steadily ready, and stop speculating, because God is not concerned with our timing.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SCRIPTURES

The first lesson describes the circumstances leading to the birth of Samuel in which the topic of barrenness is central. Here, birth is viewed from the point of view of petition.

The Psalm this morning, called the Song of Hannah, is a song of praise, containing a personal psalm of thanksgiving offered by Hannah at the birth of Samuel.

The second lesson from Hebrews continues to meditate on the meaning of the great sacrifice of Christ, pondering the meaning of his death, resurrection, and exaltation as the basis of the new sin-free life of Christians.

In the gospel lesson, Jesus describes the signs of the times, first by mentioning two distinct times of distress, and then the crisis of final judgment. Distinguishing these times from each other is important in order to comprehend the messages of this lesson.
Today is the last Sunday in the Christian year. Sometimes this last Sunday is scheduled on the Sunday following Thanksgiving, and is therefore nearly ignored because of low church attendance. In other years it precedes Thanksgiving and is therefore ignored because many churches celebrate Thanksgiving on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Since we are having a Thanksgiving service on Thanksgiving Eve, I thought it would be worthwhile to pay attention to this particular celebration, today.

The gospel lesson for today is often read during the Lenten season. It simply recounts a conversation between Pilate and Jesus.

If we look at the literature, I think it is very interesting to note that the author seems to be completely removed from the scene. The author offers no commentary and the narrative phrases are very few. This, therefore, we may assume, is simply a report from the court recorder. My purpose this morning is to leave whatever questions this passage raises in your minds. I will call it an open-ended sermon, which might seem inconclusive, but that is my intent.

Pilate asks Jesus a question; Jesus replies with a question. This was a typical form of argument among Jews of the time, but Jesus’ reply—answering a question with another question—must have been very annoying to the Roman Governor, who would have preferred some form of logical debate. Pilate then asks another question; and Jesus answers directly but enigmatically. Pilate is curious: this man's life is at stake, so why is he being so ambiguous? Pilate asks another question, and Jesus answers, again directly, but this time he uses typical Hebrew metaphors. The lesson omits Pilate's final question, "What is truth?"

One of the problems I have with this passage is that although Pilate, as Governor, probably knew a great deal about the ways of the Hebrews of the time, he does not seem to take Hebrew thinking very seriously. He questions Jesus as if the false charges that have been made against him by his own people cannot possibly be very substantial. Nevertheless, Pilate does nothing to confront Jesus’ accusers with the fact that they have no evidence of misconduct by this man Jesus.

Isn't there a need here for someone to offer a logical argument?

"Are you the King of the Jews," Pilate asked? The Hebrews traditionally understood that God was the King of Israel, no matter what human sat upon an earthly throne. Even when David was King, David was but God's regent. Jesus’ declarations reveal the religious nature of his kingdom. It is very clear that he is not talking about an earthly kingdom. If
he were a political king, there would have been political followers ready to fight for his recognition, but there were no such defenders, because his kingdom and his kingship are religious.

Jesus' reply to Pilate's question seems to imply that Jesus knew that Pilate knew exactly what Jesus was saying, and Jesus knew exactly what Pilate was asking: "Are you a king?"

In the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus responds with a cryptic Greek sentence, that is usually translated, "You say so." Literally the line says, "You yourself say." Which, today, we might translate as, "YOU TELL ME."

"Are you a king?"
"YOU TELL ME."
"Are you the king of the Jews?"
"YOU TELL ME."

Pilate tried very hard to keep peace among the people whom he governed. He knew their ways. He must have known that the Hebrew idea of a King was of a regent, one who acts as a ruler but who represents God. God was the king of Israel, and always had been. Obviously, Jesus was not a political king.

Jesus plainly states that he came into the world "to testify to the truth." Therefore Jesus presents himself as God's regent, not as a political king, and Pilate should have known this.

Pilate was not a cynic, but he was pragmatic. As governor, he needed most of all to maintain order. His questions throughout this conversation come more out of curiosity than cynicism, however, perhaps the most unforgivable thing about this narrative, is that although we should assume that Pilate understood the customs of the people whom he governed, he, instead, pretended not to understand.

Isn't it strange how curious minds work?

The week before, a great crowd shouted "hosanna to the king." Now a larger crowd is determined to have the same person immediately executed. Their hearts are ablaze with a roaring prairie fire of party spirit and rancor and undisguised hatred. Pilate does not know what to do, so he asks a few questions, but he gets nowhere. The whole scene seems monstrous.

How can people lose their sense of proportion?

Where in this confrontation between Jesus and Pilate do we find what is really important? Surely, no gift is more important and to be more desired than to be able to discern which things are primary and which are only secondary and to rank them in their due order in the living of our lives and in the working out of our faith.
"Are you a king," asked Pilate?  
"You tell me," answered Jesus.

As we complete another cycle, this celebration of Christ the King makes clear the unique and revolutionary character of the Kingship of Christ. This ruler of the kings, rules from the throne of a cross. As Christians we must be more than curious about this; we must understand. Jesus came into this world to call God's people by speaking the truth of God.

Was he a king?  
You tell me!

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Pentecost 24, Christ the King  
Date: 11/26/2000  
Communion Meditation: “Do We Need A King?”  
Text: John 18:33-27

For some, Elvis was the King. For a number of my black friends, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jesus was their king.

Today is known throughout the denominations that use the Common Lectionary as Christ the King Sunday, or the Reign of Christ.

Do we need a king? Who needs a king in this day and age? Good heavens, we Americans are having enough trouble electing our next president. Who needs to worry about a king?

As I reflect upon the image of “King,” however, I recall one of my college professors noting in a course on Western Civilization, that here in the USA we actually come closer to electing a king every four years than electing a head of government. His point was well made as he explained that in all other Western nations that enjoy a democratic form of government, our republic, which is not to be confused with a pure democracy, concentrates the head of state and the head of government in one elected office. Because the office of the President of the United States does this, the person elected to that office is more like a king than the head of government in any other Western nation.

Do we need a king? Would our nation be better off with a parliamentary system; with a president who is the head of state, AND a prime minister who is the head of government?

Of course, there are different kinds of kings. In Jesus’ day, the Jewish nation had a king who had very limited power. Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator or governor, was far more powerful than the Jewish king. So, even in Jesus’ day, the term king had different meanings for different people.

Did the people of Jesus’ day need a king? Do we need a king?
In this morning’s gospel lesson, the most powerful ruler, Pontius Pilate, asked Jesus, "Are you a King?"

In our minds, Christ is the King! He is the King of Kings. Jesus is the Son of God. He is the ruler of my heart. If we were there we would answer that question for Pilate, wouldn’t we?

“Are you a King?” What kind of a question was that? What did that mean in Jesus’ day?

Today is Christ the King Sunday. This is the day on which Christians all over the world celebrate Christ as King. On this day we remember that Jesus is King, and that he has royal authority over our hearts. We sing hymns and read psalms that proclaim Christ as the Messiah. This is our answer to Pilate’s question today.

But, what was Jesus’ answer? Listen to what is going on here. Sarcastically, Pilate asks, "So, Jesus, are you the King of the Jews?"

Humbly, Jesus answers Pilate’s question with another question: "Do you think I am, or have others called me that?"

Indignantly, Pilate responds, "Am I a Jew? Don't play games with me. I didn't say you were a King. Your own chief priests handed you over to me. Why do they want you dead?"

Jesus is then cautious with his answer. He wants Pilate, and anyone else listening in, like us, to understand his answer. So Jesus gives a qualified answer: "My Kingdom is not of this world." Our first thought might be that he means his Kingdom is in heaven. But that would be inconsistent with his teachings. Perhaps he means that his Kingdom is not like the other Kingdoms of this world. In this world, kings have soldiers who wield swords and guns to defend their king. But Jesus' followers don't carry weapons of violence to defend him. What kind of a King is this who has no territory and whose subjects do not fight for him?

Pilate then says, "So you are a king?"

Jesus answers, "I came to proclaim the truth and those who are of the truth listen to me." This is to say that Jesus may not have a territory or a militia, but he has authority. Those who are loyal to the truth of God, listen to him and do his bidding. Jesus is King to all who are loyal to the Truth. So, Christ the King is categorically different from the kings of this world. The Kings of this world rule over their subjects with the power of fear and terror. In contrast, Christ's rule is based on the power of love. In this world kings demand that their subjects be under their feet. But Christ our King washes the feet of his subjects.

Who needs a king like that?
In this age in which we live, a great many people seem to claim to be the masters of their own destiny. They claim to be their own king. Just look at the way people are shopping this Christmas season. Have you been to any “after Thanksgiving Day” sales? The news coverage of big sales on TV is much worse than what I have seen, but the whole idea of such a philosophy or discipline of greed and selfishness is deplorable.

In contrast, Jesus came to give, not to take. Jesus said, “I came that you may have life and have it abundantly.” And he offered his own life as proof and payment for that eternal life.

This Christ the King Sunday, make Jesus Christ, the Son of God, your King, and Lord of your life, and, together, let us make a straight highway through the Advent season to the birthday celebration of the King of Kings.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, we praise and adore you. You are truly without beginning or ending - your reign is eternal and your being all-powerful, and yet you chose to reveal your power in the most powerless and vulnerable manner - as a baby. As you shared our humanity in Jesus, you gave the world a new understanding of power. We know now that power is not to be used to dominate, but to serve others as Christ did. He transformed the love of power by the power of love. We gather today to celebrate your rule of love in our hearts as we experience it in Jesus and through the enabling gift of your Spirit, and we offer this prayer of gratitude for these blessings in his name. Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Eternal God, with cheerful voices and thankful hearts, we offer to you these gifts and our lives. May Christ the King rule in our hearts so that we are powerful witnesses to truth of your kingdom of love, justice and peace. This we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.
SERMONS FOR YEAR C

OF THE REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY
Advent 1
Date: 3 December 2000
Title: “Turning Up Our Collars”

Advent 2
Date: 10 December 2000
Title: “Are You Ready?”

Advent 3
Rose Sunday
Date: 14 December 1997
Title: “The Colors of Christmas”

Christmas 1
Date: 31 December 2000
Title: “Spreading Wings”

Epiphany 1
Date: 12 January 1992
Title: “Living On Tiptoe”

Epiphany 2
Date: 19 January 1991
Place: The Little Brown Church in the Vale
Title: “When Ordinary Things Fail”

Epiphany 3
Date: 26 January 1992
Title: "Resources To Last a Lifetime"
Text: Luke 4:14-21

Epiphany 4
Date: 02 February 1992
Title: “Not Yesterday, Not Someday, Today!”

Epiphany 5
Date: 08 February 1998
Title: “The Pain of Answered Prayer”

Epiphany 6
Date: 16 February 1992
Title: “Congratulations”

Epiphany 7
Date: 23 February 1992
Title: “Humanity’s Constant Flux”

The Last Sunday After Epiphany
Date: 01 March 1992
Title: "New Forms for the Common Life"

Ash Wednesday
Date: 25 February 1998
Meditation
Text: Matthew 6:5-14

Lent 1
Date: 01 March 1998
Title: “The War Raging In Every Life”

Lent 2
Date: 15 March 1992
Title: “First, We Have Coffee”

Lent 3
Date: 22 March 1992
Title: “The Power of God To See Us Through"

Lent 4
Date: 29 March 1992
Title: "Patient Mercy"

Lent 5
Date: 05 April 1992
Meditation: "Frightening Extravagance"
Texts: Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

Palm Sunday
Date: Palm Sunday 1998
Title: “Honor Or Imitate”

Easter Sunday 1992
Title: “The Assurance of Easter”

Easter 3
Date: 26 April 1998
Meditation: “What Are You Dragging?”
Text: John 21:1-19

Easter 4
Date: 03 May 1998
Title: “Strange Reversals”
Text: John 10:22-30

Easter 5
Date: 10 May 1998
Title: “Measuring Up”
Text: John 13:31-35

Easter 6
Date: 17 May 1998
Title: “A Good Promise”
Text: John 14:23-29

Easter 7
Ascension Sunday
Date: 24 May 1998
Title: “The Vantage Point”

Trinity Sunday
Date: 07 June 1998
Title: “Communicating Gently”
Text: John 16:12-15

Proper 11
Date: 19 July 1998
Title: “The Good and the Necessarily Better”
Proper 13  
Date: 02 August 1998  
Title: “Living the Kingdom Come”  

Proper 14  
Date: 09 August 1998  
Title: “You’re Ready. So, Go Ahead.”  

Proper 15  
Date: 19 August 1998  
Title: “Reading the Weather”  
Text: Luke 12:54-56

Proper 16  
Date: 23 August 1998  
Title: “Christian Hospitality”  
Text: Luke 13:10-17

Proper 17  
Date: 30 August 1998  
Title: “Keeping An Eye On Jesus”  
Text: Luke 14:1a, 7-14

Proper 18  
Date: 06 September 1998  
Title: “Getting Reality into Our Soft Heads and Hard Hearts”  
Text: 14:25-33

Proper 19  
Date: 13 September 1998  
Title: “The Seeking God”  

Proper 20  
Date: 20 September 1998  
Title: “The Rascal Parable”  

Proper 21  
Date: 27 September 1998  
Title: “An Affair of the Heart”  
Text: Luke 16:19-31
Proper 22
World Communion Sunday
Date: 04 October 1998
Title: “An Antepast of Heaven”
Texts: Proper 22

Proper 23
Access Sunday
Date: 11 October 1998
Title: “What’s Your Handicap?”
Text: (Luke 17:11-19)

Proper 24
Date: 18 October 1998
Title: “Ask, Believing”

Proper 25
Date: 25 October 1998
Title: “Politics and the Reformed Church”
Topic: Reformation Sunday

Proper 26
All Saints
Date: 01 November 1998
Title: “All Saints”

Proper 27
Date: 08 November 1998
Title: “Using Tradition”

Proper 28
Date: 15 November 1998
Title: “This Is It!”
Biblical texts are like buildings into which we enter and suddenly find ourselves surrounded by distinctive types of construction, design and architecture. Some texts are like soaring cathedrals that carry us upward through vaulted ceilings to the heights of heaven, depositing us before the throne of God. Others are like this building that surrounds us with a sense of community and comfort as we mingle among friends, giving praise for the grace of God in the eyes of those whom we admire and love. Still others are like the gospel text that confronts us today—a text that makes us turn up our collar against a cold draft—a text that has the sound of a winter wind whistling through a cracked pane of glass in a hunter’s cabin out in the back woods, with cold ashes in the stove, chairs toppled, and broken drawers pulled open, and clutter strewn across the bare wooden floor as though some desperate and crazed man had broken into the place in search of whiskey or drugs or a rifle and shells.

We find ourselves here this morning hearing this text and feeling words about anguish and ransom and fright blasting us like a bitter wind on our face, and we are suddenly, seemingly, left with little more than a God-forsaken shanty for protection. Perhaps, on this first Sunday in Advent, this is a different sort of structure than we expected; there is no living room with a warm fire, no candle-lit dining room with fine music, no quaint small-town church on Sunday morning. But this is how Advent begins—with unsettling words that will not let us forget that Christ came to save a world where unpleasant structures exist.

Advent begins with a season that severely changes the landscape from colorful leaves to gray, barren trees, telling us that the dignity of the human race, which God so loves, continues to carry the scars of human conflict. This is how Advent begins—reminding us that the world in which we live continues in its need for God—yearning, reaching, and screaming for the redeeming rescue of its longed-for Savior. This is how Advent begins—with fervent prayer and desperate longing.

I have felt this way for a week or more, but I especially felt this way as Mary and I drove here yesterday, and passed countless hunters, doing whatever God knows hunters do. Most of them were just sitting inside their cars or trucks, by the side of the road, keeping warm, perhaps waiting for game to fly in the window or jump into the back of the truck. We passed one car with four or five young men in it, all looking through binoculars. Wow! What hunters! What men!

Yes, this is the opening of the hunting season called Advent. And we ourselves are the ones being scouted by a God who would calm our fears, and call us home, out of the cold of winter, and into the radiant warmth of God, …and into the life-giving hope of salvation.
OFFERTORY PRAYER

Heavenly Father, fulfiller of promises, we come to this cold and gray season of Advent with expectant and thankful hearts. We welcome the renewed promise of your love, justice and righteousness, breaking into our world. We offer these gifts and the witness of our lives in gratitude for all you have done, are doing and will do. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Advent 2
Date: 10 December 2000
Title: "Are You Ready?"

Are you ready for Christmas? We put a lot of work into getting ready for Christmas, don’t we?

Mary and I began our preparations when Allen was home for Thanksgiving. We put the candles in the front windows, as we usually do, even though we waited until last Sunday evening, that is the first Sunday of Advent, to turn them on. There is a lot more for us to do. We have a list of things to do and we keep checking it. Do you also have a checklist?

We feel that we must decorate our homes. Each year, however, it seems like all the decorating we used to do has become an unnecessary burden. Do we really need to put every single ornament on the tree? How many strings of lights do we really need? Do we really need a crèche scene? If so, will the small one do, or do we need the big one? Shopping is still fun for me, but it is very time-consuming and tiring since I had a stroke. I would love to shop for that special something for each person on my gift list, but maybe gift certificates or cash would make more sense this year. Christmas cards? If Mary has time to do them this year, fine, otherwise their status is uncertain.

Nevertheless, my list, like yours, is probably endless. All that preparation for one day! Isn’t it amazing! But imagine what it would be like without any preparation. In one way or another, we are getting geared up to be ready for December 25th. We could probably do it all in one day, if we had to, but that wouldn’t have the same effect.

During my years as a church musician, Christmas often snuck up on me. The music seemed to take so long to prepare, and Christmas arrived too soon. I was never ready, just getting ready. As a pastor, I have been better prepared, and ready. Some years, in fact, Christmas could not arrive soon enough, and I was very happy when it was over. But, no matter what our perspective may be, there is more to preparing for Christmas than getting the decorations out and wrapping the presents, and rehearsing anthems, and preparing sermons.
With every Christmas ornament, with every Christmas present, and for me, with the preparation of every Advent and Christmas message, we express another expectation, and another hope for Christmas. When all is put together, these numerous acts of preparation set that day up to be special. They all are part of a complex expression of the “specialness” of Christmas day.

So, are you prepared?

In our Gospel reading today, John is calling the people to prepare. John came out of the wilderness shouting, "Repent and prepare the way for the Lord." He is heralding the coming of a king--God's anointed, the Messiah. In the ancient world, when a king decided to visit a part of his kingdom, he would send someone ahead of him to announce the coming of the king. This herald would also instruct the people to prepare the roads and streets for the monarch's arrival. They should clean up the streets, and fill in the potholes. The instruction to prepare the roads was a metaphor for preparing their community for the visit of a king. They were to make it look the best they could. They were to be ready to receive the king with the best accommodations they could provide.

Of course, the king that John was heralding was not interested in inspecting streets. John was saying that we need to straighten out your lives in preparation for God's chosen King. We need to make the way straight for him to enter into our lives. We need to smooth out the places that would make his journey rough. We need to be ready to accommodate the King of kings with the best that we can provide.


"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Repent and make your rough ways smooth."

Are we ready?

PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful God, we bring before you our lives, even the things in our lives that are displeasing to you, to this time of prayer, where we may reflect on your Word of truth. Straighten out the areas in our lives that hinder people from discerning your way, O God. Smooth the rough edges of our witness so that anything that prevents people from hearing your Word is cleared away.

Many people walk through shadowed valleys at this time of year, weighed down by painful obligations. Forgive us when we fail to become involved with the needs of others by pleading seasonal busy-ness.
Advent God, you call on us to prepare the way for Jesus' birth, and yet, each year it seems that we spend more time making preparations for our own pleasure than preparing for Jesus to be born anew in our hearts and lives - in our families, our communities, and our nation.

Therefore, as we prepare our homes, will you help us to prepare our hearts and minds? We know that we can get so involved in decorating, and buying gifts, and ordering food, and writing cards, that we have no energy left to celebrate the reason for such activity – the birth of your son, Jesus.

Help us to get it right. We want to prepare our homes; we want also to prepare our hearts. O come to us. Abide with us, our Lord, that we may be truly prepared for the joy of Christmas. Amen.

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Advent 3
Rose Sunday
Date: 14 December 1997
Title: “The Colors of Christmas”

On the third Sunday of Advent, we have three liturgical colors to choose from. We have the familiar Violet or Blue of the Advent season, and an additional color, Rose, for this particular Sunday. Therefore, as we look forward to the light of Christmas shining forth once again into the troubled world, I would like us to take a few minutes this morning to reflect upon the colors of this season. What colors does it reflect, and what are the meanings of those reflections?

What is the color of Christmas?

Is it RED: The red of toy shops and storefronts on a dark, cold winter's afternoon; the red of Santa Clause or Father Christmas or Saint Nicholas; the red of holly berries, or of the Christmas flowers of the tropics—poinsettias?

Withdrawning from red, one might think of days of old when the pink of forced cherry blossoms or the purple of blooming rosemary were a Christmas joy, or, perhaps the brilliant or subdued shades of a Christmas cactus, or of the Christmas rose, or the legend-heavy Rose of Jericho.

What color is Christmas?

Most of us would include in the Christmas rainbow of hopeful, promising colors, the green of holly and spruce and pine, and the mysterious mistletoe: Green that brings indoors the mystery of the woods. Green adds so much to our Twentieth Century homes, but in the Eighteenth Century and before, when there was much paneled wood, wooden
furniture, wooden beams and bare wooden floors, the effect of living green against so much brown-grained wood must have brought a formidable feeling of the outside tree world inside the house.

Today the evergreen has been so heavily overlaid with tinsel that it is difficult to appreciate its symbolism. But in this deciduous world, the evergreen tree yet demonstrates permanence--it alone is green in the midst of a world of brown and gray and white and black. We might pause for one more moment to think of why green is a prominent Christmas color. Can we contemplate a primitive mind of a primitive person of pre-historic times to which the summer-looking leaf in winter would most certainly have suggested strange powers, as if it contained within it the energy of the sun itself?

Certain species of evergreens, such as holly and ivy and mistletoe, bear recognizable fruit into the winter, displaying a miraculous triumph of the Creator's power over the elements. As long as is known to humankind, even before the birth of Jesus, these have been brought into the winter house as symbols of hope for the year to come. The depth of such symbolism is very real.

Several decades before the birth of Jesus, Virgil wrote these timeless words, here translated by Dryden:

The sun shall lead the life of Gods, and be  
By Gods and Heroes seen, and Gods and Heroes see.  
The jarring Nations he in peace shall bind,  
And with paternal Virtues rule Mankind.  
Unbidden Earth shall wreathing Ivy bring  
And fragrant Herbs (the promises of spring)  
As her first offerings to her infant King.

You see, even before Christ, green was the color of hope.

To the hope of green, let us add the romance of white fields, of frost and snow, and of a phenomenon I had not experienced before we moved to this area of Iowa--freezing fog. Some might not call white a color. The truth is, of course, that white reflects all colors. Even on the bitter days of this past week, the illusion of snow pleased us. It looks so nice. It also suggests that people will be warmer inside the house, the home, thus emphasizing the family atmosphere of the occasion, thus helping us to recall the first family of long ago. The whiteness of snow has a connotation of purity. Snow, with its flakes and its falling blanket that hushes the world, is one of childhood's greatest excitements; it changes the world, and makes magic and miracle seem really possible.

Many will say that THE significant Christmas color is gold, the gold of treasure, not the gold of Twentieth Century tinsel: the gold of kings; the gold of Balthazar, Caspar and Melchior; the gold of Galgalath, Magalath and Tharath--gold guided by a bright morning star, heralding a new day and thus a new hope.
More impressively during the cold season, there is the gold of fire—of warmth and light. Almost everywhere that Christmas is celebrated (in the northern hemisphere), there is some sort of fire lit at this time of the winter solstice. A candle in no way holds a candle to the Yule log and its fire, to honor the need for light and warmth and life-supporting energy.

And perhaps the gold of fire gets us the closest yet to the true color of Christmas, which many say is black: the black of bleak mid-winter, the black of night, the black of frost and of the north wind. In our electrically lit homes we can easily ignore the symbolism of light shining in darkness, for our entire environment is so lit up that only in the still, dark corners of human nature do we sense the black of lurking shadows beyond the reach of firelight.

Literally, it was into a world of darkness that Christ was born: there were no streetlights, no porch lights, no yard lights, no headlights, no flashlights. Perhaps that is why we traditionally celebrate Christ's birth in the darkness of Christmas Eve, with candles. This has been the tradition of the Western Christian Church, but the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates the Holy Christmas Mass at dawn on Christmas morning, with the sun rising in the East, shattering the darkness—thus the birth of the term “Christ Mass.”

In a week and a half, we will celebrate the life of a person who was born in the same way we were born, who grew up as a child in an obscure village, worked at an obscure occupation, and who walked out with no armies, and no official backing of any kind, to do the will of God. And the most amazing thing of all is that people believed him. When they came in contact with him, they found something happening to them: lives were changed, history itself was turned into new channels, all that stood in the way of human opportunity was swept away and humanity was set free.

Life A.D. is fundamentally and proudly different from life B.C. The shadows have crept away; the light has come. As the Apostle John wrote long ago, where that light shines, the symbolic colors of Christmas are transformed into a very real hope and a very certain grace.

As we go forth into the celebration of Christmas, let us follow that light, letting it radiate through each of us into this dark world. Let us go forth following in the way of him who said, "Let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Let us pray.

O holy Child of Bethlehem!
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and inter in;
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
"O come to us, abide with us,  
Our Lord Emmanuel!  
Amen.

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Christmas 1  
Date: 31 December 2000  
Title: “Spreading Wings”  

"They did not understand what he said to them." (Luke 2.50) 

Why didn’t they understand? Because Jesus was almost a teenager, and parents don’t understand anything that teenagers say! Right?

Upon the other hand, how could Jesus’ parents not understand his words? As a family they had been through so much together. Together they had experienced fear and suffered from dislocation. How could they not understand their son’s words?

As our own progeny begin to "spread their wings" in life, it is true that we will have to let them go, to find their own way in life. I suspect it is here that we find the real source of distress in Jesus’ parents. It is hardly unnatural that they should have been concerned about Jesus, for he was their son. To be less concerned would have been quite strange.

And yet, Jesus states quite plainly that the real issue is something else. He is not just their son. He has a heavenly Parent. And it is salutary to us to remember that our progeny are not entirely "ours," either. They too are children of our heavenly Parent. Our children are only "ours" in the sense that we have a duty of care, but they are their own persons when it comes to who they are and what they do in life. They are, for instance, their own persons in terms of the mistakes they make. Wouldn’t it be terribly boring if our children only replicated our mistakes? Don’t we, as parents, hope that they can find mistakes to make that are more interesting than the ones we made?

During the Christmas holidays, Mary and I had some time to discuss Allen’s plans with him. We are not too pleased that he has decided to leave graduate school in order to take a six month position in Sioux City, doing art restoration work with one of the country’s leading restoration companies. He has also been offered, and has accepted, an assignment with the Peace Corps that he will begin in August in sub-Saharan Africa. As Allen talked on and on about his future, I could not help but wonder about his graduate studies, his teaching assistantship, which he enjoyed, and his progress as a painter. The more we listened to him, the more the words from Luke’s gospel rang in my ears: "They did not understand what he said to them."
The problem was, that, on the lips of Allen, ownership of Allen already had become an issue. It became an issue years ago, really. He has always had a very clear idea of where he was going, even though he changed his mind rather frequently.

Likewise, Jesus dealt with the ownership of Jesus. Our gospel lesson deals only with the beginning of this issue, but the issue is the same. His parents did not understand what he was saying, because they wanted him to remain the same.

There is more. All Jesus’ life, he struggled with people who wanted him to stay the way he was. Mary Magdalene wanted to clutch onto Jesus after she recognized him in the garden. James and John wanted to sit, one on either side of him, in his kingdom. At the wedding in Cana, his mother, Mary, wanted him to do her will, not his: “Son” she said, “they ran out of wine.” The disciples were piqued that Jesus should associate with people who brought their children for him to bless - they wanted Jesus for themselves. Indeed, the reason that the religious authorities were so dismissive of Jesus, was that Jesus sat down and ate with other people, and not with them. They felt left out.

It is interesting that most of these characters thought they had Jesus' best interests at heart. They thought their motivation was one of love and honor for him. Even the scribes and the Pharisees who crucified Jesus thought that they had God's best interests at heart, and that their motivation was one of love and honor for the Almighty.

Of course, we know that nothing could be further from the truth. Nothing, and no one else, exists for our sole gratification. The source of Mary and Joseph's failure to understand, was not that they had forgotten that Jesus was in some special sense a unique child of God--it was a far more common misunderstanding shared by many, who wanted to be in a special relationship to Jesus, to the exclusion of others. But Jesus was not a possession. Jesus was a vehicle of grace.

Like Jesus, we, as Christians, are vehicles of grace for others. How? Basically, we are vehicles of grace as we listen to others, and ask them questions, and respond to what we hear and feel. Jesus did that, and when he did that, people "were amazed at his understanding and his answers." Jesus first listened and questioned. We, too, do well to listen and question. We, too, do well to take an interest in other peoples' lives and the perceptions they have.

Our son, Allen, has done a great deal of listening and questioning lately. He has taken an amazingly deep interest in other peoples’ lives as well as his own. Does he still listen to and appreciate his parents? Oh yes, but as a young man owned by Allen.

So also Jesus listens and appreciates us. And this is what Jesus does to us and to all who follow him. Jesus is interested in life as we live it. Jesus is interested in our perceptions of faith and life. Issues of right and wrong are fairly immaterial, for each of us is confronted with various and different trials and tribulations, and we have to respond as best we are able, as we are called to do, with the resources we have at hand.
I am not a betting person, but I will bet that most of us came here this morning with things on our minds. Even the words we have said and heard and sung here this morning have not been able to blot out all the personal agenda we brought here this morning.

Is God interested in our musings? Well, think of it this way. The places where our minds wander during worship might be more important to God than the words of the worship service. I mean precisely that God surely would be bored to sobs if God were only interested in the words of the worship service. God does not need to be reminded of what the words of scripture say. I confess I sometimes smile inwardly at just how frequently during worship we remind God that Jesus was his only Son. Is God a complete idiot?

Why do most churches have an order of service and printed bulletins? Mainly, because frequent changes to the order of things distract us from what is most important--the real and everyday things you and I bring to God during this time.

C. S. Lewis, in Walter Hooper's collection, "The Business of Heaven," speaks about "Clerical One-Upmanship." "Novelty," he writes, “can have only entertainment value…” Every service ... works best …when we don't have to think about it.

This holiday season, what are the places where our minds wander? What is real to us? What is so real that we don’t even have to think about it?

As long as you notice, and have to count the steps, you are not yet dancing, but only learning to dance.

A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice....

Jesus, by his very nature, is interested in the lives of all people. He is so real about this. He is interested in us as we are, and in all people as they are, and it is as he does this that he truly is a child of God.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, on this eve of a new year, we pause to sing of glory with the angels to the newborn King, ever marveling at the magnitude of your love for us--a love prepared to take on our flesh and be born in the humblest of circumstances. Each year, the breadth of your love brings forth from us a response of praise--a response articulated in and through worship, as we sing traditional carols and as we hear familiar words of scripture--a response embodied in loving and hospitable acts. We praise you for your great gift of love--Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who brings to birth in us love for you, O God, and love for one another. On this, the last day of this year, as we look to a new and unknown future, we know we can embrace the unknown with confidence, because you have blessed our lives with your presence in Jesus Christ, and have empowered us with your Spirit to face whatever the future holds. For these blessings we offer our praise and thanksgiving in Jesus' name. Amen.
OFFERTORY PRAYER

O God, may we go forward into the coming year confident of your guidance and your love that binds us together. Receive these gifts and the service of our lives as signs of our thanksgiving. May everything we do, in word and deed, reflect our gratitude for the gift of Jesus, our Savior and Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Epiphany 1
Date: 12 January 1992
Title: “Living On Tiptoe”

What do Christians have in common that can be understood as the starting point of faith? Is it an understanding of salvation? How about sanctification? What about Christian perfection?

Many Christians ignore these terms. When was the last time that you had a serious conversation with another church member about Christian perfection? Most Christians, I suspect, hear these words from the pulpit, from time to time, and do their best with them. But such words are seldom spoken by anyone other than ordained ministers, and very little attention is given to them by anyone who hears them.

I think this is understandable. A great many stupid, inane things have been done by Christians who thought they were “saved.” Those claiming to be holy have manifested a great many unchristian attitudes. Countless wrongs have been fostered by the elitism of those confident in their perfection. Time and time again, the world around us has suffered a great deal from the self-righteous.

Therefore, it is not surprising that we turn aside from teachings such as those in today’s lessons. Some of us would turn away from these teachings because of our personal experiences. But, as Christians, all of us have one experience in common. Then, why not pick IT as a starting point? All of us have had a common beginning in the faith--our baptism.

Today we would remember the baptism of Jesus. We would also remember our own baptism, even if we were baptized as infants. For someone, probably our parents, the time of our baptism was a time of excitement.

Epiphany is a season of excitement. When the Apostle Luke recorded the story of the baptism of Jesus, Luke told a story about excitement. There was an air of enthusiasm in the Jordan valley. We read in one translation, "The people were on the tiptoe of expectation."
The Jews had been expecting a Messiah. Each time a baby was born into a Jewish family, the parents would look into the baby's eyes and ask prayerfully, "Could it possibly be that our child might be the Messiah?" This went on for nearly 1,000 years.

Then along came John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. He was different. His preaching was different. He revived the old tradition of baptism, and many people went to the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Many Jewish people wondered if John was the Messiah. And the Apostle Luke records, "The people were on the tiptoe of expectation, all wondering about John, whether perhaps he was the Messiah."

Have you ever stood around on tiptoe, expecting something wonderful?

Once in a while I watch the television show, Home Videos. I have mixed feelings about the show. Sometimes, it is obvious that a humorous effect was the result of someone's misfortune and pain. But, one can usually watch with expectation. We know that something is going to happen. And, for the sake of entertainment, huge cash prizes are paid for the most mundane and often pathetic and sometimes cruel happenings. Then, toward the end of the show, the top three contributors participate in a contest. The first announcement is for the second place winner. Both the first and third place contenders brace themselves. Then the first place contestants are named and the third place folks disappear forever. And we rejoice with the winner, or we sigh in sympathy for one of the losers.

What if we all could be winners and live everyday on the "tiptoe of expectation?"

Christians don't need to gamble. And they don't need to stage cute, sometimes cruel scenes for the entertainment of others. Why? Because Christians always live on the "tiptoe of expectation." The story of the baptism of Jesus reminds us of this.

I think it is interesting that the church has combined the season of Epiphany with the celebration of the baptism of Jesus. When the two celebrations are combined, they remind us that God has not forgotten us or forsaken the world. God loves us, and God sent his son Jesus into the world to show us that love. In the gospel of John we are reminded that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

Hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes devastate towns and cities. Planes crash. Automobile accidents claim thousands of lives. Cancers and the Aids Virus creep into human life and destroy it. The epidemic of drug and alcohol abuse continues to destroy millions of lives. And we pause from time to time to wonder if God really cares. And we pause again and remember the message of Epiphany: God does care! The hymn writer, Malbie D. Babcock, had it right when he wrote:

This is my Father's world.
O let me ne'er forget,
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.

If God is in charge of the world, then I can stand on the tiptoe of expectation. You can stand on the tiptoe of expectation.

God sent John. God sent Jesus. God sent you. And you, as a Christian, know that Jesus was the Christ. You, as a Christian, know that Jesus is your Savior. So, you, as a Christian, have an obvious advantage over those persons who went to the banks of the Jordan River to hear John preach. You know about the gospel of Jesus. You don't have to wonder who your Savior is. You know! And there is no question of the importance and meaning of your assurance: "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!" was the pronouncement of an old gospel song. Can you make that claim? Is your heart that open? Do you know that joy?

The joy of being a Christian is not magic. The joy of being a Christian is real! Remember, Jesus was baptized by John. The disciples of John were good friends with the disciples of Jesus. And, John and Jesus were, in fact, cousins. The joy of this story is not unrealistic. It is very close to home. This joy occurs in a real life situation among real friends and relatives, all of whom were on tiptoe. This is a story about people who were expecting something from life.

Well! What about you? Do you expect something from life? If you go to a concert, don't you expect something? If you go to a ball game, don't you expect something? Of course! It's exhilarating. At a ball game the fans get excited and yell and cheer. They stand up and shout. They lose themselves in their enthusiasm. They expect something.

Most of us do not remember anything from our baptism, because we were baptized as infants. But, even then, someone expected something of our lives. Someone, on our behalf, claimed the providential power of God. Someone recognized that God was in control of the world, and that we and those who brought us into the world were not. And, when THAT happened, lives were changed. Lives were opened. And God's guidance was requested.

Are we afraid of what God might do with our lives? Are we frightened by the possibility of life on a higher plane--on tiptoe? I don't think so.

So, I challenge you this morning, during the last hymn, to pick out a phrase or two of special interest, and, as you sing that phrase, just lift yourselves up on tiptoe. Are you ready? Pick a phrase….

(We've a story to tell, we've a song to sing, we've a message to give, we've a Savior to show….)

Pick one, and sing it on tiptoe, as if you expect something. And then, take that feeling into the week ahead.
Week after week I have the privilege of presiding over very special ceremonies. Not too long ago, just before a wedding ceremony, a bride, holding a quivering bouquet of flowers, whispered to me, "This is the happiest day of my life, but--I'm so nervous."

Some days are like that; they are special. There are great days in all of our lives. Reflect for a moment, won't you, on the most wondrous moments and principle occasions in your life. Can you recall the most wonderful day? For me, such days are filled with extraordinary hope and joy.

Life involves many happy affairs: the birth of a child, family gatherings at Christmas, a summer vacation, a graduation, a wedding day…. All of these usually have at their base a genuine movement of hope and joy.

Is it any wonder then, that, in the New Testament, the first sign of Christ's glory is described in the context of a family gathering at a wedding? The scene is that of a life-giving and radiant prologue to all the stories about Jesus’ ministry that will follow.

Each of us probably has a personal way of reflecting on the biblical stories that describe Christ’s glory. But, what is the sign of the reality underlying each miracle story? Basically this: When ordinary things fail, like the supply of wine at a wedding, or water at a well, or bread in the wilderness, then the life-giving power of God can be manifest.

Of course, the hope and joy of a wedding day is expressed differently today than in the past. In contemporary times, the relationship of a man and a woman is often valued more for personal pleasure and individual satisfaction than for family and belonging. Therefore, it might be difficult today for the newly married to relate to a story that describes an unmarried woman as forsaken. But a careful reading of ancient law will disclose that the society of the time did not wish anyone to be forsaken. A widow left childless, was to become the wife of the dead husband's brother. This would allow the inheritance to be preserved, and the family was obligated to care for this person. This ancient Jewish Law emphasized that no one of God's people is to be forsaken. The love in our lives that is celebrated on a wedding day is to remain as something precious and worth preserving.

Consider marriage vows. They are so profound. In order to emphasize their profundity, I yet use the archaic pronouns, "thee and thou," in the wedding ceremony, not only in addressing the Deity, but also in the couple's vows and pledges to each other. Why? No
other vows are more tender; none are more meaningful. No other pledge, of which I know, will so radically shape and claim an individual. The two become one. A home is born. A haven for a family is founded. A couple's place is situated. But, alas, in too many marriages, and in so many lives, the wine fails.

Wine is a strong symbol. We might think of the use of wine, or its substitute, at the communion table. Wine, in the Bible, is a symbol of hope and joy. It is the beverage of choice for promises and toasts. In ancient Israel, it was the primary ingredient of a wedding feast. Wine was so important to a feast that the chief steward was the one entrusted with its selection. The steward ordered it. He was the first to taste it. He served it. He poured it.

With this as background, let us join the party. It was a wedding day in Cana, in Galilee. Jesus and his mother and his disciples are present as guests. In the midst of the celebration, a social calamity begins to unfold. Jesus’ mother comes to him saying, "They have no more wine."

How did this happen? The story does not tell us how this happened. Did the chief steward order too little wine? Did Jesus’ fishermen disciples drink too much? Did more guests appear than were expected? Whatever the reason, the wine supply failed, and the wedding celebration would soon end. The party was almost over.

Every biblical story can be considered on several levels. This story seems to be three or four levels deep. So, let's dig a little.

If the wine ran out, would this symbolize an end to the hope and joy of the celebration? Yes! And life would return to the ordinary.

In ancient times, as today, the marriage day is a day for a party. It is not an ordinary day. But, for some reason, the wine fails.

From time to time life has closed in on each of us. The sparkle, the bubble of promise and hope and joy gets to the bursting point. The shine wears off. Dreams live on unrealized. Promising ventures end in bankruptcy. Romances end with broken hearts. Marriages fail. Leaders are voted out. Careers are crushed by layoffs.

And that is life, just as summer falls down in autumn. Then autumn's splendor is buried beneath the snows of winter. And each morning gives way to evening. The young body grows old and slow. Every relationship ends, one way or another. What is the most important thing in all this life cycle? Is not the most important thing here the good gift of those you love and of those who love you?

Our gospel lesson this morning carries with it a wonderful message of life--new life in Christ. This first miracle story is a story of life-giving power and glory. The disciples are changed people. People's fears are transformed into faith. Sadness is turned into joy. The
presence of Christ in the lives of these people changes the ordinary into the glorious. The water becomes wine!

As individuals, as members of a branch of Christ's Church, we and all who minister in Christ's name, will be helped if we, too, can learn not to let the failures and needs of this world define our agenda. God is never indifferent to need. Jesus proved this. Jesus took his marching orders from fulfilled truth, not from emptiness. It was God's infinite power, not humankind's finite predicament, that centered Jesus’ mission in this world and showed forth his glory.

Sometimes the wine runs out, but as the essayist, Montaigne wrote, "Whenever your life ends, it is all there. The advantage of living is not measured by length, but by use: some [people] have lived long and lived very little; attend to it while you’re in it. It lies in your will, not in the number of years, for you to have lived enough."

If we dig deep enough into this truth we may also conclude that the best is always to be. Recognize the temporary for what it is and celebrate the temporary. As the Apostle Paul once wrote, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." This was Paul's way of saying that the best is yet to be.

Take advantage of today. Don't overreact. Don't focus on problems and needs. If you do, you will take them into tomorrow. Today, use every common and ordinary thing in your life to the fullest. If there is emptiness in your life, just let it go. Dare to believe that the best is yet to be. For with God, there is always more.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, we praise you today because your love never ends, because your truth endures forever. You know who we are and from where we have come today. Some of us are numbered among the faithful. Some of us are half faithful, some unfaithful. Some of us are still strong and confident because we have plenty. Some of us fear failure. Some of us are embarrassed because failure has already found us.

But now we are before you, and we pray the same prayer. You have created each of us, and all of us. Our lives are alike in the transient and temporary ways of humanity. Our need for your grace is the same, for we all have sinned. We all must end this life alone. Therefore, hasten to hear us; be quick to heal and to forgive, and send forth your truth. Fill us with your Spirit and save us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Epiphany 3
Date: 26 January 1992
Title: "Resources To Last a Lifetime"
Text: Luke 4:14-21
In the fourth chapter of the gospel according to Luke, Jesus announces the coming of a new age. Some of those who hear him do not understand, some are surprised, some are happy, and many are angry.

Consider the scene for a moment. Jesus is in his hometown. He has not been in his hometown for a while. Luke records that Jesus went to church "as his custom was on the Sabbath day." Jesus was a churchgoer. He was also recognized as a rabbi, or teacher, and he was highly respected in the towns of Galilee. In his hometown synagogue, everyone spoke well of him, and the few comments that are quoted are interesting: "Say, isn't that Joe the carpenter's son?"

Some found Jesus’ message challenging and interesting. Some, however, found it offensive. I suppose the problem we are dealing with here, is the problem of really getting to know the person who declared the Word of God with such fresh insight and meaning.

Who is this person? "Oh, that's Joe's son." Well--that's fine, but how do we find new ways for the historical person, Jesus, to fit into our modern life-style? As C. S. Lewis wrote in his book, *Surprised By Joy*, Jesus is "a transcendental interferer." (REPEAT) Those who meet Jesus don't know what to do with him and don't know what to do without him.

The people in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth had the same problem. They welcomed him and sang praises UNTIL his words rankled their feelings. It was OK for Jesus to read the scripture lesson in church, but when he identified himself personally with the message, that was too much. For many reasons, Jesus did not fit in. The gospels tell us so. It's not easy to fit Jesus into human experience.

When Jesus read from the scriptures about loving our enemies, announcing good news to the poor, releasing prisoners, restoring sight to the blind, and freeing broken victims, that was acceptable. When he said that he was going to do those things, however, a great many people decided that THEY suddenly did not have the time, the concern or the energy to stoop to the needs of the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and the outcast. “If Jesus wants to do that, fine, but don't expect me to do that,” was the crowd's response.

Yes, people admired Jesus when Jesus visited his hometown. People admire Jesus today, but only from a distance. Many gave him lip service then, and many still do. Some occasionally offer him a helping hand, but most do not find a place where he fits in. So, we might ask ourselves, "Where does Jesus fit in?"

One thing that is very clear in the gospels is that Jesus fit in where he was invited. This followed the pattern of his teachings about God. He said that God loved to invite us to be in relationship and friendship. The New Testament has preserved a number of teachings on this subject. Jesus talked about a king who gave a party for his son. The invitations
went out, but the people refused to come. Why? Matthew gave the following reasons: the people made light of the invitation "and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them."

The Apostle John gave us a classic picture of Jesus standing at the door of the human heart, knocking and waiting for an invitation to enter. The implied question is, "Do we care?"

Most people who are reluctant to invite Jesus into their lives are not strangers; they are people who have heard about Jesus--people like you and me. Yes. Jesus is loving and caring; Jesus is also very critical, very demanding, and very judgmental. Well, so are most of the people we call friends. Who is more critical, more demanding, and more judgmental, than our friends? They would not be our friends if they did not believe in us, nor could we be a friend without believing in our friends. There are some things about our friends, are there not, that we see more clearly than even our friends see. And our friends see more in us than we probably see in ourselves, or want to see. They are not strangers.

Friends fit in where they are accepted. And they are accepted because they fit in. Which, I think leads us to a startling conclusion. Generally speaking, we accept persons who look like us, act like us, and think like us. In our so-called free society we talk about pluralism, and openness. In what was the Soviet Union there is much talk about GLASNOST. This is a step in the right direction. But our human acceptance is, usually, very exclusive, because we accept what we like.

We try to accept Jesus. We try to accept the life-giving Spirit of God into our lives as Jesus did. But we can wind up being so exclusive.

In the past, ministers were often asked to offer invocations at high school graduations and at a host of school and community programs and events. I recall a story, from my college days, about a minister who was asked to offer an invocation at a college football game. In the prayer, he invited God to take time from his busy schedule to watch the football game. When the minister finished the prayer, the telephone rang in the booth at the top of the bleachers, where the minister had offered the prayer over the PA system. The minister answered the phone. "Hello," he said.

The voice on the other end responded with, "Hello. This is God, uh, what channel?"

We have difficulty accepting God into our lives, but God accepts us unconditionally. Jesus knew that he was accepted by God, and Jesus wanted everyone to know the same truth.

Another interesting statement in the New Testament is also about the time Jesus spent in Nazareth, his hometown. We read in Matthew, "[Jesus] did NOT do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief." Where people allowed Jesus to use God's gifts,
there were deeds of power. Where the people did not allow Jesus to use God's gifts, not much happened.

So, let me ask you two questions. Have you ever given a gift that was not appreciated? Do you remember how you felt?

Do you remember being in a situation where your gifts were appreciated and eagerly accepted? That is a very different feeling, isn’t it?

All of us live on the same planet, but those two experiences are worlds apart. Most of the time we can get through life on our own wits. However, there will come times when we need resources greater than our own. So, accept the gift. Open the door, and you will have the resources to last a lifetime.

Let us pray.

Eternal God, we are privileged to come into your presence with thanksgiving and praise. You have preciously given the gift of life to us, and you have allowed us to have freedom of choice and chance. You have invited us to express our concerns and have generously involved yourself in those areas where you are invited, needed, and accepted. Thank you for being sensitive to our freedom and for refusing to break in, manipulate, and control.

When we take time to know you, we are surprised at your graciousness and love. Thank you for trusting us to work out our own salvation. And yet, we realize that there is a great need for your involvement in our lives. We need to know that your ultimate plan cannot be aborted; that faith, hope, and love are eternal; and that history has meaning and purpose. We need you to be involved in the political arena to aid those who lead us to be people of integrity, to give guidance to assemblies and institutions that they may be worthy of their names, and to instruct us in the ways of peace and good will.

We invite you to be a part of our world and to use your gifts to bring us to a greater understanding of Jesus Christ, that we may enthusiastically answer his call to follow in his say. Through your leadership, may new doors of opportunity open to us, new roads of purpose lead us further down the road of life, and new insights lead us to greater fulfillment. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

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Epiphany 4
Date: 02 February 1992
Title: “Not Yesterday, Not Someday, Today!”
As I was reviewing the lessons for today, I recalled an old rugged poem from my first year in college. It is rather terrible. But it is the sort of thing that meant something to me at a special time in my life:

to do,
before it should,
the day before then,
when there is time before,
for it never can be done again,
and be to do

Isn't that ghastly! But, at the time, my life needed some discipline. It was my first time away from home, and the freedom, and the studies, and a stunning brunette seemed to demand more time than God had created. There was so much to do each day. Would I be properly prepared for the next class? Could I party a little on the weekend, or did I need to spend all weekend in the library just catching up?

In retrospect, I suppose my poem might have been some kind of subconscious reaction to all the analytical studies that were being crammed into my brain, in order to alert me to the fact that tomorrow never really comes. Tomorrow never comes, but freshman do not think that way. Do old people think that way? I am not sure. Perhaps only middle-aged people think that way? This week I was thinking that way! In a sense, tomorrow never comes.

I had been meditating on this subject all week. Then, yesterday it struck me, and, as I prayed about the events of the coming week, I knew that tomorrow would come. And yet, something else inside of me was telling me that it is “what is about to happen” and “what is happening now” that really makes a difference in my life. A promise that only applies to the distant future benefits no one and costs little.

I recall a story about a restaurant manager who dared to advertise with a big sign that said, “Free lunch tomorrow!” He then left the sign up for a week, and tomorrow did not come, and he lost quite a few customers because of his un-practical joke.

The Word of God is never like that, although some weak substitutes are. God's Word is immediate and compelling. It is eventful; it is happening now. We experience the immediacy of God's Word in simple things, even, as I would declare as a former college English instructor, in the experience of a “language happening.” What is a “language happening?” It is a word event. Here are a few:

Hello, how are you? Won't you please come in? Please, have a seat. You're fired.

These are word events. They change things. They make a difference. They are immediate. When they happen, they happen NOW.
Last week we considered a story about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The scene was his hometown. The big TO-DO happened on the Sabbath. Jesus went to church as was his custom, and was asked to read the appointed text from the prophet Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to announce good news to the poor, release to the prisoners, sight to the blind..."

Jesus read great words of hope, words of promise, words which roused those wearied by life, words which looked into God’s new day, when fortunes would be reversed and God’s people would be free. And while those potent words still hung heavy in the air, Jesus, the hometown boy, rolled up the scroll, handed it to the attendant, sat down in the teacher's chair, and said, "Today, this text, which you have just heard, has come true."

According to the gospel of Luke, the first recorded word of Jesus’ public ministry is "Today." The kingdom is present Today! Not tomorrow. Not someday. The word to Jesus’ hometown congregation, and perhaps to every church, is "TODAY."

As we might expect, the response to this startling announcement was mixed. Some murmured approval, excited perhaps by the suggestion that God's activity in the human arena is not just a memory, not just an empty hope, but a living story that shapes us and identifies us and confirms our experiences of God in our midst, even today.

Today, the Lord is our Shepherd. Today, God will give rest to the weary and the heavy-laden. Today, the gentle of spirit are blessed. Today the merciful receive mercy. Today the pure in heart see God.

But the admiration was not universal nor was it long-lived. In short order the conversation would take a nasty turn. They ran Jesus out of town.

My sense is that in the world in which we live, Jesus is not so much opposed as he is dismissed. Today, most people would not claim to be against Jesus. They would not stone him, crucify him, or push him off a cliff. They are more dangerous! They ignore him. They dismiss him.

In his hometown, they dismissed him with, "Isn't that Joe and Mary's boy?" Out of town people would learn that Jesus was from Nazareth and say, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

So, who is Jesus: the boy next door, the stranger, a friend, a new comer? Who is Jesus to us, who know him so well?

Let us pray.

O God, the story of Jesus is a story that shapes us and identifies us and confirms our experiences of you in our midst, even today. It is a living story, not just a memory. For this we thank you. May we not simply murmur our approval of this story, but, instead, show it forth through our lives as Jesus did. Amen.
All three of the lessons we heard this morning share the same theme. Isaiah has a vision of God in the Temple and he does not know what to do. Paul is changed by his experience of the risen Christ, and Simon Peter sees himself in contrast to the holiness of Christ. All three persons were seeking something, but, when they got it, they were overwhelmed.

Isaiah, prayed for light. When his prayer was answered, he was scared out of his wits in the presence of God's glory. Paul prayed for an understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. When the risen Christ appeared to Paul, Paul's life was so radically changed that he struggled to find words to explain what happened to him. Simon, a fisherman, was an incredulous person, but one who was willing to take a chance, so when Jesus told Simon to cast out his nets one more time, and the results were amazing, Simon hardly knew what to do.

When holiness comes commanding and calling, lives are changed. But the changes can sometimes be painful because of the intensity of overwhelming circumstances.

There is an old tale about a Scotsman who lived along the shores of Loch Ness. He was an avid fisherman, as well as an avid atheist. He fished on the Loch every day of his life, and usually caught something. One day, his luck was not with him. Nothing was biting. He thought to himself, oh, just one more cast. As soon as his lure hit the water, something smashed into his boat with such a force that he was thrust into the sky. As gravity took its hold, the atheist fisherman, who probably didn't even believe in gravity up until this point, was soon headed downward, headfirst, directly into the wide-open mouth of the Loch Ness Monster. Instinctively, he cried out, "Oh, God, save me!" Suddenly, his body stopped in mid air. He was frozen in time and space. There he remained, above the wide-open mouth of the monster.

A resonant, low voice began to rumble through the clouds, which finally bellowed out, "I thought that you didn't believe in me."

The fisherman looked up, and then looked down, and answered, "I thought that I didn't believe in the Loch Ness Monster either."

During the early years of my ministry, after serving a wonderful congregation for several years, I decided to apply for a position that had just become open. Such a position would allow me to concentrate in an area of ministry for which I was specially trained and well
prepared. I applied, sent my dossier, and was asked to come for an interview, after which I prayed and prayed that I might get that position. Then, Mary and I together were asked to come for another interview. I prayed more and more that such a position would be God's will for me during the next phase of my ministry. Then, one day I received a telephone call. Yes, a letter will also be coming, but the call preceded it to break the news. I still remember my response: "Dear God, now what am I going to do?" I was overwhelmed with joy for such an opportunity, but then there was the packing, the moving, and the goodbyes. There was no parsonage, but, instead, a housing allowance. We would need to buy a house, which meant that we would need to look for a house to buy, and Mary and I had never done these things before. What do we do next? What do we do first?

Oh, the pain of answered prayer!

All of us, I assume, have worked hard for something. Perhaps it was physical work, and our bodies ached. Perhaps it was mental work, and our minds ached from over stimulation, or lack of sleep. Perhaps we have stood in a line for hours, or sat in a waiting room, only to be told that we will need to wait even longer. Our prayer at such times, if we had one at all, might have been, "O God, just let it all stop. I can't take any more."

Perhaps that was the feeling Simon Peter had after an exhausting night of fishing. "Just throw your nets in one more time," said Jesus.

"Master," replied Simon, in polite biblical language, "we were hard at work all night and caught nothing." When I read these words in context, they sound something like, "excuse me," or, "are you kidding," with undertones of "drop dead" echoing through them. All that effort, and nothing! We know how life goes, do we not? We work and work and work, and sometimes at the end of the day it all adds up to nothing.

Perhaps some of you have worked on community projects. You took around petitions, you enlisted volunteers, you talked to civic organizations, wrote letters to the paper, worked on fund raising, and then some jerk, who has never contributed anything to the community, shows up at a town council meeting along with a bunch of griping protesters who try to shoot down the whole project, and you wonder--you wonder, "Why, after we have worked all these weeks--WHY did we even bother?" And the one sure thing you do not need at such times, is someone standing over you, saying, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again," which was exactly what Jesus said to Simon.

"OK, if you say so," says Simon, probably more out of exhaustion than compliance, "one more time."

So, Simon lets down the nets one more time, or, as Count Basie used to say, "once more once!" One more try! Just one more creative try for good, for truth, for happiness, is let loose. And WOW! The nets were so full that they nearly fell apart, and the tired and grumpy fishermen couldn't even drag them in. When they finally got the fish into the boats, the boats started to sink. And again I think the biblical language seems to be a little
weak here, or shall I say a little too tame for fishermen. I would rather have Simon Peter say to Jesus, "Get out of here!" And have Jesus kindly reply, "Oh, relax. You wanted fish? You got fish!"

Recall the times when you thought you were defeated, and you had no more strength to carry on. But you did. Remember the bitter times, when you were convinced that you could not forgive. But you did. Recall the times that you had given all you could and you could give no more. But you did. Recall the dangerous times, when you lacked the courage to stick your neck out for what was right. But you did.

If we can think back on those times, and consider all that has been best in our lives, we can discover that we were not alone. There was something there that was more than our ability, helping us say to ourselves, "one more try," and answering ourselves with, "OK, if you say so."

Those were times when holiness came calling, and our lives were changed. Those were times of Amazing Grace, which remind us that it is truly amazing what God can do with just a little bit of obedience on our part.

Amen.

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Epiphany 6  
Date: 16 February 1992  
Title: “Congratulations”  

I assume that every church-going Christian knows the Sermon on the Mount, which is presented in the gospel according to Matthew, but I do not assume that every church-going Christian knows the Sermon on the Plain. Every time I refer to the Sermon on the Plain, as it is found in the gospel according to Luke, eyebrows usually go up and eyeballs roll.

The two are parallel. Luke’s version, however, is thirty verses long, whereas Matthew's rambling version is one hundred and seven verses. Personally, I prefer Luke's shorter sermon, which focuses on four blessings and four woes that mirror each other: those of the poor versus those of the rich, those of the hungry versus those of the filled, those of the weeping versus those of the laughing, and those of the rejected versus those of the accepted. Luke simply provides "blessings" and “woes" that are pronounced by Jesus as statements of fact.

The statements are not suggestions on how to improve ourselves. They are not a list of problems to be avoided. They are statements of fact. They are performative statements
that do what they say and make into reality the way of life presented in the statements. They are, simply, either congratulations or curses.

You are either blessed or you are cursed! Today! Right now! Period! And that is that!

Oh my!

For this reason, Luke’s sermon is the more uncomfortable of the two sermons. It deals with a great many things that we learn only indirectly. Jesus, however, took the time to tell people about these matters directly. Oh my!!

Most of us live with and around people who never tell us anything directly. They probably think they are being kind, caring, and sensitive, but the things that people do not tell us are just as important as the things they do tell us. Likewise, the things we admit to ourselves are usually at least as important as the things we deny.

Recently, a friend of mine, about my age, who is overweight, equally over the hill, out of shape, with high blood pressure, went to have a physical examination. He knew he had gained weight, had not kept to his exercise routine, etc. His doctor said to him, "I see you have gained a little weight over the Christmas holidays and your blood pressure is a little high. I would like to hear about where you have been and what you have been doing with yourself.” The physician’s gentle words went in one ear and out the other.

Later, after the examination, the doctor was more direct: "Unless you lose some weight, exercise regularly, and cut out the fat and salt in your diet, you will die at a young age with a massive heart attack just like your father. You can continue to overlook the reality of your physical condition or you can do something about it. The choice is yours to make!"

The doctor's soft words did not have any impact, but the hard words struck home, and my friend knew from the harsh, confronting words that his doctor was right. He also knew that whatever he did now might help to prevent a heart attack or a stroke later in life.

I am not overweight, but I have my own health problems and sloppy habits that affect my physical condition. I know that I should make certain changes in my life style as I grow older, but I also know that I am very human, and we humans do not like to make changes in our daily routines even after someone points out the benefits for us. Somehow it is easier not to worry about tomorrow by simply living for today. But Jesus said, "Blessings to you who make changes and woe to you who don’t.”

Today we are standing flat-footed, listening to the Sermon on the Plain, and trying to decide if we will be blessed or challenged in our faith, if we will receive Christ’s congratulations or his curses. Which will it be?

I once served as a fill-in pianist at a very fine restaurant in Illinois that was owned by friends of mine. All of the waiters and waitresses were singers and they performed for the
diners every evening. One very busy weekend, the small, exclusive restaurant, which was usually filled with quiet, sophisticated couples expecting to enjoy the unhurried atmosphere of gracious hospitality, was, instead, half occupied by parents with young children. The restaurant boasted that nothing was prepared ahead; everything was prepared from scratch, thus the evening was usually very long and very pleasant for those who have the time and money to enjoy such a place. But young children do not have the patience of their parents, nor should they be expected to have such patience.

Well, … the appetizers were served and the parents desperately tried to keep their children occupied. The musicians kept performing, much to the joy of the children, but soon the place became rather noisy. Children began to cry, and then to scream, and the parents were very edgy. Some took their children for a walk, then returned and tried to eat something before the next episode. By the time the main courses for the first seating were being brought out from the kitchen, the quaint and usually quiet dining room was in a state of chaos.

One older couple got up and left in a huff. Another older man with a bushy head of curly silver hair left his wife at the table, dashed out and returned shortly thereafter with a big paper sack. Without a word, he began to blow up long balloons, twisted them into figures, and offered them to each of the children. Everyone watched the magic quietly and ooooed and ahhhed and laughed.

Every person of every age suddenly changed. The room was filled with cats, dachshunds, poodles and other dog shapes, elephants, monkeys and giraffes…. Soon a crown was made for the pianist (me), who then sorted through his music to pick out the theme from Sesame Street.

(dd, dd, dd, dd-dd, dd, dd, dd-dd, Sunny Day, ….)

The balloon man blessed the place. Blessed be the balloon man! Congratulations to the balloon man!

Sometimes we cannot blot out the chaotic world around us, but we can change it; we can make it better.

So it was with my overweight, out-of-shape friend. He quickly found that regular exercise and a healthy diet made him feel better, and his life was changed, and the lives of the people around him were changed. So, congratulations to that doctor! And congratulations to my friend! People who eat well and exercise regularly, not only feel better, they also suffer less from stress. They cope better. And they have more hope.

Blessings or woes? Congratulations or curses? Which will it be?

Christ’s congratulations are not earned. They are, simply, the by-products of how we live our lives today.
Let us pray.

Lord God, we have done nothing to earn your favor. Therefore, may we so order our lives that we may be ready to receive your congratulations as the by-products of the way we conduct our daily lives. Amen.

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Epiphany 7
Date: 23 February 1992
Title: “Humanity’s Constant Flux”

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, is the way most of the world responds to evil.

This past week the media carried yet one more story from the Middle East of the terrible vengeance that violence brings. Retribution and punishment are the favored responses to wrongdoing and crime. This is the primary purpose of prisons. This is why we still have a few Neanderthals advocating capital punishment.

The New Testament, however, is filled with the imperative, "Do not repay evil for evil." Paul wrote this to the Christians in Rome. The writer of Hebrews, and the writer of I. Peter wrote the same thing. "Do not repay evil for evil" is a familiar concept to Christians, but it is not common practice.

Those who study law, know that "an eye for an eye" was a law designed by primitive humans to prevent excessive punishments for crimes. Today, however, society has a rule of law that is more complex, but the purpose is the same. In the United States, as in most Western nations, the legal system has evolved into a system that punishes the crime, and not the criminal. Here, thieves do not have their right hands chopped off. Instead, thieves are sentenced to prison and fined. This marks a real movement toward the realization of the command, “Love your enemies,” that is not found, say, in Middle Eastern Moslem countries.

But, as far as justice is concerned, the world is in a constant state of flux.

In his book, Love or Perish, Dr. Smiley Blanton refers to humanity's constant flux between peace and war, achievement and destruction, and prosperity and poverty. Blanton illustrates his point with the philosopher Schopenhauer's view of humanity--that we are like a herd of porcupines huddling together to keep warm in cold weather. If porcupines get too close, their quills prick and give pain to one another. If they get too far apart, they freeze to death. Only constant shifting can enable them to determine what position will avoid both extremes.
How then does one move from hostility to hospitality, and from treachery, betrayal, and ill will, to sympathy, empathy, trust and understanding? I don’t know! But, here is an even more demanding imperative: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But, I say to you, do not resist an evildoer.... Turn the other cheek, and go the extra mile.”

These are interesting words, because there is only one more cheek, and nothing is mentioned about going two extra miles. And yet, even as the advice is limited in its generosity to the enemy, these words move us beyond the familiar concept of, "Do not repay evil for evil," to something that is not only uncommon, but, in the real, everyday world, almost unheard of.

We live in a world where Christian principles and high ethics are not the rule—where even good manners and common human decency are foreign. We may talk about love in the ways the Bible talks about love, but where is that love operating in the real world? People talk more about rights than about ethics, and they usually talk more about ethics than they talk about love. They simply assume that all of the constitutional rights guaranteed to citizens of the United States belong to them.

How do people really love their neighbors today? Most people love their neighbors by being nice to the people who are nice to them. Therefore, what they call love, is nothing more than a form of enlightened self-interest.

So, what then happens when someone does something against us or against someone we love?

If you do not exceed the speed limit by at least ten miles per hour these days, usually the driver in the car behind you will try to urge you to drive faster. Right? What is your usual reaction to that?

I like to use my cruise control on open roads. One thing that really annoys me is to have someone tailgate me for several miles, eventually pass me, and then proceed at a speed slower than what I was doing before I was passed. (At such moments I often think about one of James Bond’s cars with rocket launchers and lasers and machine guns installed in it.)

Then, to make matters worse, along comes Jesus, who, instead of comforting me, joins in the assault by saying, “Love your enemies.” That just doesn’t make any sense.

Or does it?

First of all, Jesus affirms the fact that we have enemies—real enemies. Have you ever taken that presumption seriously? Most of the time we cover up the fact of our enemies by avoiding them and by trying to be nice to them, because we want people to be nice to us. We forget that we have enemies. That is not good, because we need to know who they are.
Jesus is not interested in ethics here. Jesus is not interested in our kind of love for one another. Jesus is not interested in our individual rights. He most certainly is not interested in our opinions. He is not interested in our relationships. He is not interested in our calculating, subtle forms of enlightened self-interest.

**JESUS IS INTERESTED IN OUR BEING INTERESTED IN THE INTERESTS OF OUR ENEMIES.** Why? Because they are our enemies! Not because they are our friends or even potential friends, but because they are our enemies!

One of the greatest of modern theologians, Carl Barth, put it this way: "Love your enemies" is not a call for some do-gooding. Nor is it a call for us to exercise, through the strength of our own willpower, extraordinary moral virtue.” Barth goes on to clarify Jesus' words as advice to Jesus' disciples. He writes: "Love your enemies is a marching order never to allow rejection or opposition which they [the disciples of Christ] encounter to divert them from their accepted role as witnesses of the Kingdom."

Jesus was saying that we must be single-minded only in one way--only as we are witnesses for the Kingdom of God in the world. No matter what the world is doing, no matter what the world is doing to us, no one has the right to be single-minded except in this one sense--as one is being a witness for the Kingdom of God in the world.

That might create enemies. Therefore, we must know who our enemies are and treat them as such. We don't have to like them; we do have to love them.

God's word for us today is simple. It is unqualified. It is straight and to the point. And it is difficult. But, apparently, God thinks we are worth it.

Let us pray.

Sustain us, O God, in doing what you command and in avoiding what is destructive to us and to the communities in which we live. Amen.

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The Last Sunday After Epiphany
Date: 01 March 1992
Title: "New Forms for the Common Life"

One day, long ago, a humble carpenter's son from Nazareth, on his way to an uncertain future, was at prayer on a mountain. While praying, he was transfigured. The story of that transfiguration includes references to the great Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah, but the glory of the story rests on Jesus. It is a story about things appearing in a new light.
Jesus had a change in appearance, but also a noticeable change in his disposition, which is difficult to imagine.

Can you recall the power of your imagination when you were a child? A child's imagination can make things into new forms. I suppose that is why, as we get older, we continue to be entertained by the television. We, too, can win the lottery. We, too, can fly to exotic lands. We, too, can be clever, humorous, and good-looking.

But then we look in the mirror, and when we look in the mirror, there is no “evidence”—to use words from the Apostle Paul—there is no evidence that WE are being transformed from "splendor to splendor."

We are often more under the influence of our dreams and fantasies than we imagine. Therefore, we should not misunderstand Paul, because, according to Paul, we are to be the mirror, not the image. There is a big difference between being the image and being the mirror, that is, between observing ourselves and reflecting the image of someone or something else. As J. B. Phillips translates Paul's words, we are to "reflect like mirrors the glory of the Lord."

Some people try to be the image; some try to be the mirror.

Think of the difference this way: two people are falling in love and are getting ready for a date with each other. Before the date, both fuss with their appearance. They keep returning to the mirror as they dress and fix their hair. Nothing is right. As long as they are preoccupied with their own images, doubt and concern shadow their eyes.

Then, at last, they join each other's company. The faces that had peered into the mirror, charting every blemish and wrinkle, are transfigured in the presence of each other. The eyes shine. The lines of concern relax into natural smiles. The clothes feel more comfortable as the bodies adjust to a posture of confident joy. The two people are no longer obsessed with their own self-image in the mirror. They have become themselves a mirror of their beloved: they have not lost their individuality and identity, but they each reflect back delight, joy, concern, and affection for the other person.

This analogy has its limits, but it illumines what Paul meant when he said, "We all reflect as in a mirror the splendor of the Lord; thus we are transfigured into his likeness, from splendor to splendor; such is the influence of the Lord who is Spirit."

This may not happen on the first date. But if two people who are in love have more than a passing infatuation, then their initial radiance will deepen and mellow through the years. It can and it will develop "from splendor to splendor."

This happens also in enduring friendships. It happens on a larger scale in families and also in communities.
There are, however, times of stress and conflict in all human relationships. When we encounter them, if we do not want to break up, or crack up, we use more formal ways of relating, and there is wisdom in such behavior. There are times when the heart is too tender and wounds are too raw to risk our usual familiarity.

We live by the law of our relationships, but not by their spirit or their grace. No friendship, no marriage, no community can sustain itself indefinitely on law, even on divine law. Life is too sad, too happy, too complex, and too unpredictable for that. Instead, we must live by the Spirit, for "where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty."

The liberty of faith is not the liberty to do whatever we darn well please. The liberty of faith is the liberty that comes from reflecting the grace and love of God—the liberty of lovers and friends to be mirrors of each other, to reflect all that is best in each other.

We may never realize our dreams, and we may never embody the televised fantasies of mass culture, and we may never win the lottery, but if we rely on the grace and Spirit of the Lord, then we will find that we are being "transfigured" into the likeness of the Lord. This is a metamorphosis not unlike that of a butterfly; it is more wonderful than our most extravagant dreams, and more satisfying than television's most luxurious version of the good life. (As a sign in the office of a friend of mine reads, “What the caterpillar sees as the end of the world, the butterfly sees as the beginning.”)

We will not see this metamorphosis in the morning mirror. We will not be able to record it on video any more than the writers of the New Testament could capture the transfiguration of Christ upon the mountain. But we will sense and feel the transfiguration of our common life in our words and acts of love. Then Paul’s extravagant claim will be our own: "We all reflect as in a mirror the splendor of the Lord; thus we are transfigured into his likeness, from splendor to splendor; such is the influence of the Lord who is Spirit."

Let us pray.

O God, may we be people of faith. Give to us now what Jesus had: a faithful heart, and the determination to reflect your splendor. Amen.

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Ash Wednesday
Date: 25 February 1998
Meditation
Text: Matthew 6:5-14

“Concerning almsgiving: don't show off, and don't toot your own horn. When you fast, don't look dismal in order to impress others. Your heavenly Father who sees in secret will know that you are doing these things and no one else needs to know.”
“And when you pray, pray privately,” said Jesus, “don't make a big deal out of it: get to the point: cover the basics, and the details will take care of themselves.”

My brief meditation this evening is on Jesus’ words in the gospel lesson about prayer. Obviously his words are about private prayer and not about public prayer, as in public worship. They focus our attention on the importance of creating a personal prayer environment wherein we may be intimate with God.

I recall a Dennis the Menace cartoon from years ago, in which Dennis is kneeling at the side of his bed, with his hands folded, and his head bowed, offering his evening prayers. His mom is looking in on this touching scene from Dennis's bedroom doorway.

"Thank you for my home, and for my mom and dad," continued Dennis. “Thank you for my friends, etc., etc., etc.... AMEN.”

Dennis then climbs into bed; his mom switches off the light and closes the door, leaving Dennis alone in the darkness. Dennis climbs back out of bed, kneels beside it, folds his hands once again and says, "Now that we're alone...!

So many of us allow ourselves to be subject to distractions while we pray, and there are so many distractions. Even the people closest to us can steal away from us the precious privacy we need in prayer.

The season of Lent reminds us, among many other things, that we need to take some time to be holy once in a while. We might not need an entire “sweet hour of prayer,” but we need a few special moments on a regular basis.

It's a communications thing! Communication problems are problems we have all our lives. Is not life, in a sense, one big communication problem? Is not all of life involved with trying to articulate what we know and feel with our spouses, with family members and friends, or with others at a meeting, or in a speech or lecture?

Therefore, I would like to close with a meditation on our Lord's brief prayer and ask you to consider doing likewise as you use this model prayer in your devotions during the season of Lent.

First, the opening words: “Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name.”

When we address God as "Father," we accept one of the greatest gifts that Jesus could bestow upon us: the realization that God really cares for us. God is not an abstraction; God is our father.

“Thy kingdom come.”

When we pray these words, we commit ourselves to help make the kingdom come--to
help bring about a world in which justice, freedom, goodwill and love are the controlling forces.

“Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

By bringing earth and heaven together in one phrase, we affirm that eternal life is here and now, which affirms the essence of our Christian faith.

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

Here we affirm the unity of the material and the spiritual, both of which we need for wholeness, and for both of which we are dependent upon God.

“And forgive us our trespasses (or debts, or sins) as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

We have sinned, we have made sad choices, and we have disappointed and sometimes hurt others. We need a new start, and praying these words opens the door to a new day.

“And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.”

We need God's leadership. It is so easy to make decisions based entirely on our own whims and wishes and weak wisdom. In true humility, we ask for God's guidance.

“For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.”

Lent 1
Date: 01 March 1998
Title: “The War Raging In Every Life”

"One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The wilderness story is alluring and devilishly subtle. The story haunts us, and a talking devil may tempt us to view today's gospel lesson as a story that has nothing to do with reality. But, then we listen to the speeches in this lesson, and we know it is true—it is always true…. The voices of temptation are the universal, time-tested voices of temptation.

TEMPTATION IS TEMPTATION! We know it happens. Therefore, we church-going folk pray week after week--some of us day after day--"lead us not into temptation."
Surely, the temptation of the wilderness of life is real to us, but we still deny it. Someday we will live twenty miles removed from sin, and at least ten miles away from temptation. Since we can't live there right away, however, perhaps we will at least be able to send our children to college there. I am saying this, of course, with my tongue firmly planted in my cheek, as a parent who lives in a town of some 1,300 beings, whose son is a sophomore on a state university campus of some 24,000 beings. In which community do you think the temptation of the wilderness is greater?

I have officiated at the weddings of numerous couples who have told me stories of their post-college adventures into the big business world outside of Iowa. Soon, disillusioned, they returned to Iowa in order to pursue an idealistic life-style in the place of their birth, only to find that Iowa, after high school, is no different from anywhere else in the big world, except, perhaps, that there are fewer jobs here, and that the wages are lower, and the taxes are higher.

The wilderness is so real. We who live in such an environment are constantly trying to turn stones into bread.

Westward from the Jordan River are the wilderness mountains. For thirty miles north to south and fifteen miles across, there are no towns, no wandering herdsmen, and there is no spring water. In that stretch of desert terrain between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, Jesus withdrew. Then, as now, the sun sinks below the horizon and the only sound heard is the jackal's howling cries. With a stone for a pillow, like Jacob of old, Jesus found himself foodless, homeless, and alone. There, the wilderness battle began. This is not a staged drama. This is a drama in which a human being encountered all the craftiness of the human conscience.

We all know, do we not, that there is at work in our world a diabolic force that is in opposition to the creative, redeeming work of God. I do not speak of a devil out of John Milton, horned and hoofed. I would speak of a counter force--destructive in its purpose--evident in every culture and in all ages of human history, and present in every human being.

Our only defense against such a force is a right ordering of our priorities in life.

Jesus got his priorities in order. It was not easy, but, by the grace of God, he did it. As a result of his achievement, the basic lesson of this gospel story is that evil need not triumph.

As Christians, the good news for us is that we, too, can walk this road and get to our destinations by the grace of God. Therefore, we Christians still pray, "lead us not into temptation--deliver us from evil," which most often translates into, "deliver us from easy compromise and expediency in our daily temptations."

Amen.
All of us have experienced rejection. When we were young, there came a day when we were not chosen to play. Years later, we were left sitting alone at a dance. Perhaps there was a Dear John letter, or a rejection letter from the first college of our choice, or a letter telling us that we were turned down for the wonderful job we had hoped for. In later life perhaps we were turned down for the promotion of which we were certain. In a thousand ways, both brutal and subtle, we have experienced rejection. Few of us, thank God, have experienced the kind of rejection that Jesus experienced, but all of us have experienced rejection in some form.

There is a very interesting book by Margaret Jensen, titled, First We Have Coffee, in which she writes a touching account of her father being voted out of a pastorate. She describes how the news reached her. She was a college student, and she was called to her college dormitory phone. Her sister, Grace, was on the phone. ”Margaret, this Grace.” Then, after a pregnant pause: ”Papa has been voted out [of the pastorate].”

Margaret goes on to write: ”Unable to share the family disgrace with anyone, I went to class and failed the biology exam for which I was well prepared.... I tried to figure out what could have gone wrong with Papa's call. In my mind, the ministry had somehow been disgraced.” For ten years her father had shepherded and loved that Baptist congregation, but now they did not want him anymore.

When Margaret arrived home, she found her Sister, Leona, furious. Leona explained life as she saw it for the Norwegian immigrant pastor: ”''They wanted an American pastor....''

"What will you do now," Margaret asked her mother? Her mother's answer reflected a faith that seemed never to change: "God never fails, but it will be interesting to see how he works this one out. BUT NOW WE HAVE COFFEE."

Not only are pastors voted out, but rejection happens in every other profession as well. Henry Rosovsky, in his book, The University: An Owner’s Manual, reports that in the arts and sciences at Harvard University, approximately eight out of ten assistant and associate professors are denied tenure. He refers to the vote, which frequently occurs at the end of a six to eight year term, as "explicit rejection."

Being denied tenure is not a casual act. It is not generic rejection, because you are a female, or black or old. It is not prompted by some faceless force, as in a corporate takeover. It is not provoked by a reduction of staff or caused by sales that have slowed.
This rejection is "carefully calculated," and determined by associates and friends. It is even made public. From that point on, the scholar is "marked with a scarlet letter."

We do not want to be rejected and we do not want those close to us to be rejected. We want to protect ourselves from rejection. Doctors tell us that our tendency to protect ourselves from pain, including the pain of rejection, is a natural phenomenon. The first moment we sense any discomfort we draw away from it. If something is hot or sharp, we know it in an instant and draw back from it. If we are cold, we want to be warm. If we are wet, we want to be dry. If someone does not like us, we avoid that person. If we are faced with an unpleasant confrontation, we put it off. We have learned well, and we know how to avoid pain.

But pain is sometimes necessary. I recall a very sad missionary story about a leper who was left without feeling in his limbs. One day he stepped on a loose stone and turned his ankle over completely, causing a major sprain that tore away the ligaments so that the sole of his foot was pointed inward. But he walked on, never feeling the injury. In so doing, he severely damaged the ligaments. Doctors corrected the leper’s turned ankle the first time, but without the protection of pain, the leper turned and sprained and tore his ankle again and again, until finally he lost his foot.

Should we then respond to the pain of rejection by playing it safe? As this morning’s gospel lesson points out, that was not Christ’s way nor has it been the way of his disciples who faithfully followed in his way. Is not facing the rejection of the world a part of what it means to bear the cross?

One of the most noteworthy of modern poets, James Russell Lowell, describes the worth of risking rejection in his poem, titled, “Slaves:”

They are slaves who fear to speak,  
For the fallen and the weak;  
They are slaves who will not choose,  
Hatred, scoffing and abuse;  
Rather than in silence shrink,  
From the truth they needs must think;  
They are slaves who dare not be  
In the right with two or three.

Let us pray.

In the lonely places of our days, we have sensed your nearness, O God. Be always before us, we pray, and with your gifts of faith we will not be shaken. Amen.

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Lent 3
Date: 22 March 1992

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Sometimes it is a good thing to be confident and filled with hope. A small boy expects to become a strong man because of what he is and what he will be. People in bondage have visions that they will one day be free. And yet, sometimes it is a foolish and dangerous thing to expect great things. Should anyone hope that a shiny new car will never rust, or that this human body will never get old? NO! But people easily become overconfident about a great many things.

Today's gospel lesson tells of how the Zealots of ancient Israel were motivated by a false hope. They were overconfident, and overconfidence is the beginning place of idolatry. Perhaps overconfidence, more than anything else, leads people to a false sense of security, but overconfidence seldom leads to deliverance.

Luke introduces two puzzling incidents. Galileans offering righteous sacrifice at Passover are slain by Pilate. Workers building a watchtower at a sacred place in a holy city were killed when the tower fell.

The people of Jesus’ day were very primitive in their thinking. If something good happened, it was a sign of God's blessing. If something bad happened, it was a sign of God's punishment for evil actions. That kind of theology is still around today. Even Christian clergy are guilty of passing it off, preaching such words as, “If you live by faith you will get everything you want.” Callous conservative politicians, especially, seem to be guilty of passing off the negative side of this primitive theology: If you are homeless, hungry and unemployed, it is because you are lazy, crazy or sinful. A great many people, even today, assume that there is a direct connection between suffering and sin.

One day, when people around Jesus were acting as though they believed in such a connection, Jesus gave an unequivocal, stinging response. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? NO!" "Do you really think that those eighteen construction workers in Siloam died because they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? NO! That is ridiculous. But I will tell you something,” continued Jesus, “unless YOU repent, YOU will all perish just as they did.”

Comfort does not come with goodness. There is no guarantee that you will be saved from anything just because of your goodness. Likewise, suffering is part of the risk of human existence. Suffering can happen to the best of us. Yes, there are consequences to our wrong behavior, and we do bring a certain amount of pain upon ourselves, but there is also such a thing as innocent suffering that is not the result of the sin of the sufferer. That is why it is called innocent suffering: The sufferer did not necessarily do anything to deserve it.
Pilate had killed some Galileans. Workers died in an accident. That was the news of the
day. Did they get what they deserved? Were they worse sinners than all the rest? NO and
NO! We all are in this life together, and suffering can happen to the best of us.

O. K., that is fine. Now what? What about the rest of what Jesus said "Unless you turn
from your sins, you are going to get the same treatment."

Jesus was not so much confronting those around him as he was describing a basic fact of
human existence: We are connected with each other. The actions of the many affect the
few. The actions of some affect the many. The attitudes, values, and assumptions of
society have effects for good or ill. When the result is pain and suffering for innocent
people, we would better be smart enough to turn in a new direction, or sooner or later all
of us will suffer. That is a general principle.

So, let us revisit the two main points here. Years ago a minister colleague of mine,
serving a church in Connecticut, was shot and killed in his church office. A drug addict
came into the church office asking for money, was given some money, and then pulled
out a gun and shot my friend in the head.

Do you really think that my colleague was the worst preacher in his town? Do you
believe that his death was the result of something he had done—-that he somehow
deserved to die? In the light of this gospel text, we should probably answer with Jesus,
saying, "No! It could happen to any of us."

Likewise, there is no direct connection with a person's death and a person's goodness. If I
were to reflect on the character of the people in my own family, I would have to conclude
that a good number of the nicest relatives died rather young, and a number of the most
despicable family members lived inordinately long lives that seemed to be of no benefit
to anyone, including themselves. This is frustrating, but how do we deal with such
matters?

If President Bush (George H. W. Bush) does not do well in the polls, will the United
States military launch another attack on Iraq? It is very possible. We live in a society that
too quickly resorts to violence in order to deal with frustration. How many people have
you watched die on television this week? Are not such events the top stories of every
newscast?

This is a big issue that affects every one of us. If Jesus were alive today, he would
probably say the same thing he said 2000 years ago: "Unless you repent, unless you
change your way of thinking and living, and unless you turn in a new direction, all of you
stand the same risk."

What then if you are on the receiving end? What if you are the innocent sufferer? The
warning is the same. Do not become presumptuous. The things that happen to others
could happen to you. "Unless you repent, unless you change, you stand the risk." Or, as
the apostle Paul put it, in the lesson from I. Corinthians, "If you think that you are standing, watch out that you do not fall." (I. Corinthians 10:12)

Do not become presumptuous. The things that happen to others can happen to you. As Paul warned, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful." The innocent who suffer are not alone. The God who went to the cross with Jesus will go to the cross with them, and he will go to the cross with us. GOD IS FAITHFUL! If God will not provide a way out, God will at least provide a way through.

Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to bad people. Is there a connection between salvation and goodness? No! Is there such a thing as innocent suffering? Yes! Therefore, we must not become presumptuous, but instead be assured of, and confident in, the power of God to hold us firm, to give us strength, and to see us through.

Let us pray.

O God, source of all patience and encouragement, give us good work to do and days in which to do it. Amen.

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Lent 4
Date: 29 March 1992
Title: "Patient Mercy"

(This morning our scripture readings deal with a new beginning in a promised land, the new creation in Christ, and the welcome of a waiting father. All three themes reveal a reconciling God.)

We hear the word, "reconciliation," from the pulpit on a regular basis, but we do not experience it in everyday life on a regular basis. When we read the apostle Paul's words, "God was in Christ reconciling...and giving to us the ministry of reconciliation," we are reading some of the most difficult words in scripture.

Most people want thieves and cheaters and liars to be brought to justice. We want life to be fair. Therefore, we do not usually talk about reconciliation if we suffer while another person gets special favors in this society. We do not talk of reconciliation when insolent, vulgar, and contemptible people crassly challenge principles central to the integrity of our life and work. Because of this, the parable of the prodigal son and the waiting father always seems to be disturbingly new.

This story speaks convincingly of the patience of God. It is a story of forbearing love that goes beyond any sense of rightness. Neither of the sons expected this love. Neither the
younger nor the elder is portrayed as a person who obviously deserved that love, and yet, all the while, their father loved them with a patient forbearance that sought the well-being of both.

When Jesus told the story of the waiting, loving father, he was telling it to people who had probably not experienced such love. Therefore, the point was and is that reconciliation begins with God. Reconciliation is a manifestation of the patient mercy that is a primary quality of the God revealed by Christ; it is not a primary quality of most of God's people.

Far too many so-called Christians spend most of their lives in a spiritual wasteland. God only knows why they call themselves Christians. They are something like sports fans, but with an obvious confusion in the realm of the Spirit. For instance, people who sit in the stands do not usually think for a minute that sitting there makes them hockey players or basketball players or football players. In ordinary life, we do not confuse observation with participation. But so-called church members are confused about such matters all the time. A person who is baptized at the age of three months or so, is confirmed at the age of fourteen or so, and, later in life, thinks that he or she has become a so-called church member. Most, however, will eventually become worried about their fate in our booby-trapped world, because there is no point to such a religion.

So, consider carefully, if you will, the parable about the waiting father.

When I think of this parable I also like to recall a prayer of Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order: "Teach us, O Lord, to serve and not to count the cost, to labor and not to ask for any reward, save the reward of knowing that we do your will."

The most glorious reward of any profound relationship is, simply, the relationship itself. The younger brother learned this the hard way; the elder brother had not yet learned this. And the elder brother missed something else. Certainly the underlying question in the parable of the waiting father is, "Do we understand God's grace?" The elder brother is portrayed as a person who did not understand grace. (True—the younger brother did not expect it, but the older brother did not understand it.)

Grace never compromises with sin, but grace does invite sinners to come home, where they are no longer slaves or servants, but, rather, sons and daughters. Martin Luther compressed this understanding in one of his hymns:

'Tis through thy love alone we gain
The pardon of our sin;
The strictest life is but in vain,
Our works can nothing win;
Wherefore my hope is in the Lord,
My works I count but dust,
I build not there, but on His word
And in his goodness trust.
Hear now The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother, and Their Waiting Father: (Read Luke 15:11-32.).

*Lent 5
Date: 05 April 1992
Meditation: "Frightening Extravagance"
Texts: Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

Memory is wonderful.

All of us, I am certain, forget things from time to time. But none of us would like to think about the time when, God forbid, we would actually forget everything. As we contemplate the aging process and anticipate the time when our ability to remember will wane, we, perhaps, realize that memory is wonderful. Memory can also become the cause of pride, prejudice, and bitterness, but, at its best, memory gathers confidence, vision, and courage from the events of the past.

As people of faith, we are encouraged to remember God's mighty acts. The scriptures are filled with reports of them. Therefore, when we need encouragement, all we need to do is read the scriptures, and we can be assured that God, indeed, does act mightily. And there is more: If God has acted mightily in the past, then perhaps God can act mightily now. But God's extravagant acts are not perfume, and the season of Lent reminds us of this.

Recently I read about a missionary surgeon who, upon returning to America, assured his colleagues that they knew nothing about gratitude. He had worked in the Gaza Strip following the Israeli war with Egypt. He stopped one day at a peasant hovel to see a woman on whom he had performed surgery. She and her husband were dirt-poor. Their livestock supply consisted of one Angora rabbit and two chickens. For income the woman combed the loose hair out of the rabbit, spun the hair into yarn, and sold it. For food, she and her husband ate the eggs from the chickens.

The woman insisted that the missionary surgeon stay for lunch. He accepted the invitation and said he would be back for lunch after he had gone down the road to see another post-operative patient. An hour and a half later he was back. He peeked into the cooking pot to see what he was going to eat, and he saw one rabbit and two chickens.

The woman had given up her entire livestock supply--her income, her food, everything. The missionary surgeon concluded his story by reminding his hearers that they knew nothing of gratitude. And he wept unashamedly. Why did the woman do that?

In today’s' gospel lesson we heard of a woman who poured costly perfume over Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. Why did she do that?
Lovers do such things. At the turn of the century a well-known Scottish preacher remarked, "You show me the person who, for the sake of the one she loves, has never purchased a gift she could not afford, and I will show you someone who is not fit for the kingdom of God." (Nowadays, since we all have credit cards, perhaps everyone is fit for the Kingdom! Perhaps not!)

At some point, however, perhaps, each of us has bought such a gift and paid such a price. Not every week, of course, but one day we did, as we thought of our dearest. We suspended calculating common sense and icy rationality, and we did it! Anyone, who, at the time, had labeled the extravagance as "irresponsible" would plainly not know that love is incalculable. And, would the one to whom our heart had turned, who had entered that bright new world to which the loved one is the key, have taken the opportunity to remind us of THE POOR, who, as Jesus reminded us, are always with us? Probably not! Only a Judas Iscariot would do such a thing.

We still have the poor with us, and our text for this morning must never become a pretext for forgetting the poor, especially since they are so readily forgotten. Cruel dictators forget them. Dollar-obsessed industrialists forget them. Ideologically blinded leftists and rightists forget them. Do busy people like us forget them? Yes, we do.

But we can do better than that. We can at least emulate the woman who poured herself upon Jesus.

Let us pray.

Eternal God, renew us, cheer us, strengthen us, and send us on our way rejoicing. Amen.

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Palm Sunday  
Date: Palm Sunday 1998  
Title: “Honor Or Imitate”  

How do you measure success? What makes a person successful? What does it take for a person to succeed in life?

Years ago, after studying seven thousand men over a ten-year period, Srully Blotnick wrote a book titled, Ambitious Men: Their Drives, Dreams, and Delusions. I have read a great many biographies and autobiographies over the years, about religious leaders, political figures, musicians, artists, business leaders, and many more, but I must say that the most colorful biographies are usually about ambitious people.

Blotnick concluded that successful American males come in four types. First is the Clint
Eastwood type: strong, silent, and direct. A generation earlier, Blotnick might have chosen John Wayne. Today, his Eastwood choice seems out of date, but the characteristics would be the same: a person who hates phoniness and does not care what other people think. Second is the John Davidson type, again a little out-dated, but the characteristics remain the same: articulate, suave, well-mannered, eager to please, and always ready to put people at ease and to court their favor. I was trying to think of another person of this type, and I thought of Al Gore, because I suppose I tend to look at the political realm for examples, and no one else in the political realm, today, seems to have such characteristics. Third is the Lee Iacocca type: the hard charging, self-made man, who wants recognition and draws attention to himself. Finally, the Saul Bellow type: the creative loner, the reclusive intellectual.

What, according to Blotnick is success? In America, success means fortune, fame, power, and prestige. Success is something that can be measured quantitatively through performance and by dollars and cents.

Q. How does one become successful?
A. By being ambitious!
Q. What is ambition?
A. Ambition is the desire for more.
Q. More of what?
A. More of everything, but especially more of what we have already: more money, more fame, more power, more prestige.

I must admit that I am very impressed with the accuracy of Blotnick’s description and the irony of mentioning it on this particular Sunday, which commemorates Jesus’ successful entry into the city of Jerusalem. This is how the scriptures describe Jesus: “…though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself… and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” (Phil.2:6-8)

What would Blotnick do with a person like Jesus? How do people, like us, respond to a Jesus who turns our ideas of success and failure upside down?

When we look at Jesus on Palm Sunday, we should conclude that Jesus had made it, according to Blotnick standards. He was successful—very successful at a particular moment—so successful that he was honored with a parade. The crowds cheered Jesus; they waved palm branches, which were a symbol of political power. When we talk about palms on Palm Sunday, we are talking about a symbol of political power, not religious power. Jewish prophecy predicted that someday a king would arrive in Jerusalem on a donkey. This was a man to watch! If there had been pollsters at the time, Jesus’ ratings would have been off the chart.

But when we read about the tears in his eyes as he approached Jerusalem, we know that this was not a Clint Eastwood.
One of the texts that is often read on Holy Thursday has Jesus saying to his disciples, "The leader must be like the servant." So, this is no Lee Iacocca!

On Good Friday we hear the words of Jesus before Pilate, before the Council and before Herod, and we notice that this is not exactly the people-pleasing John Davidson type, either.

After the rest of the story about Good Friday, where does Jesus fit into any of the images of success?

And, we might ask ourselves, what does it mean to follow in the way of such a person? What does it mean, in Paul's words, to follow in the way of a person who "emptied himself" and was obedient even to death on a cross? The Good News Bible translation of Paul's words is, "Don't do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but [instead] be humble toward one another... look out for one another's interests, not just for your own." These words are interesting, and they are encouraging, because they point out that we are not called to do what Jesus did, and thank God we are not. But we are called to have the attitude that Jesus had, and this was Paul's point.

Many people honor Jesus, and that is good. Many more remember Jesus, and that is good. But we are called to imitate Jesus, not just honor him or remember him or honor his memory. We, too, need to die with our self-ambition, so that we might be raised to a new life--not a life governed by desire and ambition, but a life governed by a hope that redefines what it means to be a man or a woman in this world.

There is so much selfish ambition in this world, and the desire to boast is the cheapest thing around--talk about a supply of something that far exceeds the demand! But when was the last time you thought that there was too much humility in the world around you, or that people were looking out too much for the interests of others and not enough for their own?

Let us pray.

Lord, God, open the fortresses of people's stubborn ways that all things good and true and blessed may yield the peace of Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

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Easter Sunday 1992
Title: "The Assurance of Easter"

Scientific proof that is absolutely conclusive is not gentle. Scientific proof is compelling; it is brutal. One is forced to believe.
Signs of wonder, upon the other hand, are not so ruthless. Signs of wonder claim one's attention, but they only Invite belief.

The stone that was rolled away from the tomb on Easter morning was a sign, perhaps, but it was not proof. Thus, the paradox of Easter! Even in Jesus' day, people liked hard evidence. People demanded proof.

People want facts. We are impressed by bone and sinew and flesh, and, like the women who witnessed the empty tomb two thousand years ago, we want to know about the body of the dead person. When we are confronted with the bodies of our dead, we give first attention to the cause of death and second to preparation for burial.

Therefore, on Easter, especially, we might consider the words of our Lord to those who sought after his body on that first Easter morning: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5) This is not a difficult question for Easter people – for people with an Easter faith. I am not talking about people who gather once a year for an early morning pagan spring ritual, or for some kind of Christian Ground Hog Day. I am talking about Easter people who find joy in the gentle, open, and far-reaching mysteries of life.

I remember a six-year-old child, trying to put together what he saw with what he believed. The boy came to the funeral home to see the body of his beloved grandfather. He stood on tiptoe to look into the casket. He blurted out, to his grandmother, "He's not here, Grandma. Gramp's not here." The grandfather's body was there, and the cosmetic art of the undertaker had made every physical feature lifelike. Death was effectively masked, but the child saw it right.

The scene I just described reminded me of the death of my grandfather. At the end of the funeral service, as the family made its way past the casket for the last time, I asked my grandmother if I could please just touch my grandfather’s hand. She said, quietly, "Go ahead." But my mother, and several other so-called grown-ups had a fit. My mother came after me, to hasten me away. But my grandmother, who had her own agenda, reached for my hand, and, with her hand, placed my hand on my grandfather's hands, which were folded across his cold chest.

Thanks to my grandmother, I knew, first hand, as it were, about the cold reality of mortality. Thanks to her, I was blessed with sight that sees beyond the shadows of earth to the light of eternity.

Two decades later, as my grandmother faced her own mortality, she one day declared to me, "Oh, Tommy, if I did not KNOW that I have a loving Savior, I could not live from day to day." She knew. She was an Easter person with an Easter faith.

You see, don't you, that Easter is more than the story of the resurrection of Jesus. Easter is more than lilies on the altar and a free breakfast once a year.
SOME of us can, I suppose, predict what will happen between sunset and sunrise during a given twenty-four hours. MOST OF US CANNOT. Therefore, most of us rejoice in the Easter message, because death is so often illogical. The more we love life, the more irrational is death.

And yet, scripture would correct our troubled thoughts: “But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died; and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace.” (Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-3)

The story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44) exists for the sake of one saying. Jesus corrected those who misinterpreted the raising of Lazarus by saying, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25-26)

Of course, taken literally and physically, that saying of Jesus is not true. Every person has experienced or will experience mortality. This fact compels us to look more closely at the biblical teaching about resurrection. The biblical idea of resurrection, above all, is the conviction that WHEN WE DIE, WE DIE! However, the God who gave all forms of life here, and an appropriate body, can obviously be trusted to maintain a meaningful relationship with us.

WE do NOT have the option of deciding whether or not we wish to have eternal life. BUT GOD DOES. The justice of God requires it, and the love of God requires it.

Four or five years ago Irving Berlin died. At the time, I was playing the piano a couple of nights a week at a friend’s restaurant, and encountered numerous requests for the song, "Always."

I'll be loving you, always,
with a love that's true, always....
Not for just an hour, not for just a day,
not for just a year, but always."

There is something so right and assuring about that sentiment. The apostle John reminds us that God so loved the world that whosoever (that is very personal)--that whosoever believes will not perish but have eternal life. Why? Because, only eternity can satisfy the genuine demands of personal love, which are not for just an hour, not for just a day, not for just a year, but always.

As we face life's ultimate questions, we need the assurance of Easter; we need the assurance of the REAL Easter.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, may we offer the tribute of our praise for the everlasting hopes that arise within our hearts. Amen.
Easter 3
Date: 26 April 1998
Meditation: “What Are You Dragging?”
Text: John 21:1-19

Life can be a drag.

Has your life ever had long, drawn-out periods of dreariness, filled with dreaded and drab aspects? Is your life dragging now? Is it heavier than it used to be? If it is, then, perhaps, you ought to ask yourself, “What am I dragging?”

I recall a little episode from when I was young. My mother asked me to get a few vegetables from a neighbor’s garden that the neighbor had offered for our supper. I decided to take my wagon to collect the vegetables, and thought there would certainly be room for my little brother to ride along. So, I loaded him in the wagon and off we went. We picked up the vegetables and Donald climbed back into the wagon, and we headed home.

But pulling the wagon back home got harder and harder. When I looked, I discovered that my sweet little brother had stuck out one foot and was dragging it ever so gently, just to make my efforts more difficult—and, I suppose, just to remind me that he was my little brother.

Life can be a drag.

What are you dragging? Or what, if you should turn around, would you discover that is dragging you?

The gospel lesson tells us about the disciples returning to Capernaum, and to the Sea of Galilee. They were really down. They were dragging! They did not know which way to go or what to do. Gloom had engulfed them. Their sorrow over Christ’s death clouded their vision of him as the resurrected Lord. Peter said, "I'm going fishing."

"We're coming with you," said the rest, but they still seemed to be dragging. They fished all night, but they didn't catch a thing.

Life can be a drag, especially if you are a fisherman dragging nets through lump-less water.

Of course, Peter was not just fishing in order to escape his gloom. Peter was a fisherman. He did not go fishing just to kill time; he went back to work. After he made his decision to go back to his work, however, there was nothing. No fish. Nothing!
When I was rather young my mother and father took me to see the movie, “The Old Man and the Sea,” based on Ernest Hemingway's famous book—a classic movie based on a classic book, which remains visually present in my mind to this day. The old man was washed up, and fishless for a long time.

One day he decided to go fishing again. He caught the biggest fish he had ever seen, but that, too, produced a problem. He had sailed too far. Schools of sharks attacked the carcass of the great fish and tore it apart.

"Half fish," says the old man. "Fish that you were. I am sorry that I went too far out. I ruined us both. But we have killed many sharks, you and I, and ruined many others." He was dragging from exhaustion—from emotional depletion, and from physical weariness, but something kept him going. The old man prayed and fought the sharks again and again.

There was nothing left of the eighteen foot fish when he finally reached port, but there was the sense that he had done his best, as stupid and weary as he was. And he was the marvel of the whole village, for everyone saw the immense skeleton tied to his boat.

Peter and the others may very well have felt like Hemingway's old man.

Have you ever felt like that? Are you dragging?

Shortly after we moved to Iowa from Wisconsin, I read a story about a boy from a small Wisconsin town. He was eleven years old, and he had a dream. His grandfather had given him a fishing pole for a birthday present when the boy was very young. Since then, the boy fished nearly every day. One day he caught so many fish that he could not carry all of them home. When his mother followed him back to the stream and found a pile of fish, and helped carry them home, she called the town paper to send someone over to their house to take a picture of the all the fish. As the reporter from the paper interviewed the boy, the only answer the boy offered to the reporter's questions was, "It's hard to say."

"Do you prefer ice fishing in winter to pole fishing in summer?"
"It's hard to say."

"How old were you when you first went fishing?"
"It's hard to say."

"What kind of fish do you like most to catch?"
"It's hard to say."

When you are living out a dream, it's hard to say what part of the vision is best.

What are your dreams? What are your visions? Do you seek fulfillment for your labor and joy in the things you do? They are yours! Your dreams, your visions, whatever your
age, they are yours.

So, like the boy in Wisconsin, keep fishing. It is hard to say when it will happen, but we know that, just as in the fishing story about Peter, Jesus is nearby, waiting for our answer when he calls out, "Caught anything yet?"

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Easter 4
Date: 03 May 1998
Title: “Strange Reversals”
Text: John 10:22-30

The lessons this morning present strange paradoxes: A Lamb becomes a Shepherd. Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, becomes the Shepherd who says to those who would listen to him, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

Even if we study these words from the gospel lesson and understand them, one of the strangest things, I think, to notice in the gospel lesson, is that this is not what happened in the Temple that day. The people who were there were so upset with Jesus that they picked up stones to throw at him. There was a cold wave of disbelief that day. The sun did not break through. The arctic antagonists chilled the scene to the point that there was no hope for the message of Jesus to bloom or sprout.

I think it is interesting for us to understand that the setting of today's gospel lesson was Jerusalem in the winter. The Festival of the Dedication of the Temple is during Hanukkah. Winter nights in Jerusalem can be chilly, and snow can often fall in the early morning to be followed by a toasty warm and balmy afternoon. This past Thursday was like that where I spent the day: chilly, dark and rainy for a while, followed by a breakthrough of sun that warmed the atmosphere into a sweat-producing steam bath. Some of these dramatic temperature variations are evident in the visit Jesus made to the Temple: cool attitudes and the cold reserve of disbelieving folk, contrasted with the toasty warmth of those who were ready to accept what Jesus said.

Most of us, I am certain, have our warm as well as our cold moments and hours and days. We are like faucets: turn the lever or the knob one way and we are warm, sometimes hot. At other times, we can re-start the Cold War just by opening our mouths or by looking at someone a certain way. And each of us has probably experienced cold waves of doubt and faithlessness as well as bursts of the warming sunlight of faith.

Some people are warm all the time. Have you ever known a person who could, just by walking into a room, warm up to whole place? I have. And then, there is the amazing reverse effect of people with iceberg personalities who generate glaciers of contempt wherever they go.
I have met a number of brilliant people during my lifetime: some were capable of great warmth, but others had their minds frozen over in intellectual snobbery. As a pastor, I have met people who, although they attended worship every Sunday, as I got to know them, revealed hearts that had turned to icicles of spiritual disdain.

So, what is happening in each of us today? Are our spiritual furnaces ignited? If we are already warm, do we still have the pilot light in the furnace lit, just in case of a cold snap?

What will we spread this coming week? Warmth and light, or cold drafts and chilly ideas.

There was a bone-chilling rift between the people and Jesus that day in the Temple. The great religious thinker, Helmut Thielicke, once wrote, "Taking God seriously means to take him at his word, giving him the chance to act as he has promised." But the Temple worshippers that winter's day in Jerusalem chose to be like the weather; they didn’t give God a chance to act. There was persistent frost in their attitudes. Disbelief became unbelief that day.

This time of year reminds us, I believe, that in most cases frosty gloom can last only so long before the sun will penetrate the thick gray layers of clouds. And when that happens, it is not so much a matter of seeing the sunshine as feeling the sun’s warmth.

Therefore, as we prepare ourselves for a Holy Communion, this is the meditative thought I would like to leave with you: The significance of our faith and work as Christians is not only a matter of hearing the gospel, but also of experiencing its power--the power of the blessing we have to give to others. Let us shine today, but more than that, let us warm up the world around us.

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Easter 5  
Date: 10 May 1998  
Title: “Measuring Up”  
Text: John 13:31-35  

Inside the kitchen broom closet in my family home in New Jersey, there was a yardstick. When we visited my mother a few years ago, I found that there was still a yardstick in its traditional place. It is an old and very worn piece of wood, and rather stout compared to the flimsy versions that are sold today. I must admit, that while my brother and I were growing up, it, or one of its predecessors, was sometimes used for purposes other than measuring things.

There is also a set of notches and pencil marks inside the broom closet door--actually two sets: one for me and one for my bother, with dates by each mark, which measured our height as we were growing up. The yardstick inside the door was used to measure off the
In a way, each inch on the door was, for me, an accomplishment. The people in my family were not very tall. That never mattered much to me while I was young, however, because I never ever measured up to my classmates in school. My parents let me start school at the age of four, when most kindergartners started at the age of five. Therefore, since I was from an altitude-deprived family, I was always the smallest person in my class. When I wrestled in high school, there was only one other kid on our team that I could wrestle with in practice, and when I went to matches, I often just sat on the bench, because the other team had no one in my weight class.

Yes, every inch on the kitchen closet door was an accomplishment. I wanted to measure up. My ambition was to be taller, and bigger, and stronger.

I began piano lessons at the age of seven, but since early childhood the instrument I really wanted to play was the pipe organ. Our church had a very nice pipe organ, and the organist promised me that when I was tall enough to reach the pedals, I could practice on it. I thought that day would never come. As the notches slowly crept up the kitchen cabinet door, I wondered if I would ever reach the pedals on the pipe organ console. My ambition was to measure up: to be taller.

When I was finally, barely able to reach those pedals, I persuaded my parents to allow me to take organ lessons. I had finally measured up. In doing so, I discovered a curious thing: Measuring up involved more than physical height. Measuring up helped me acquire a whole new dimension in my personality. There is something a yardstick cannot measure.

It occurs to me more and more that our relationship with God is similar to my relationship to those marks on the kitchen closet door. We devoutly and hopefully wish to measure up to the image of God into which we are created. Therefore, we check our growth from time to time against certain standards and values. We embrace the Ten Commandments, we try to live the Golden Rule, we seek to discern the Beatitudes, and we check ourselves from time to time, perhaps each week on Sunday morning, to see how we are doing.

And yet, we are faced with a dilemma. Like the yardstick in the kitchen cupboard, or the marks on the inside of the door, the very standards that would enable us to grow into God’s likeness can be turned against us.

I believe it was last week, on the morning show, that CBS had a series on lying. Did any of you watch it? The segment I saw was on white lies. The point made by a psychologist was that white lies are often necessary in order to avoid conflict. Lying is still wrong, but it can often serve a purpose if it can help us avoid painful conflict.

Did you lie last week? Yes, white lies count.

Did you steal? Yes, being late for an appointment and thus robbing someone of his or her
time counts.

Did you practice the Golden Rule? Did you hunger for righteousness?

My point here is, that we no more participate in the nature of God now than when we first started trying. There is an irony here. The standards that we would keep and the standards that judge us do not at last save us or change us. In the end, we always fail to measure up, thus, our need for God's grace.

In today's gospel lesson the disciples of Jesus are faced with a dilemma. Jesus is leaving them. How can they keep going? What standard will they use to measure their life together? In the midst of their dilemma, Jesus offers them something new. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." These are common words. We have heard these words from the gospel many times, but has it ever struck you as odd that Jesus "commanded" love? Love is not something that can be made to order. Love is spontaneous, and free: a grace, a gift, if you will. Love is found; it is not commanded, or demanded.

"You have to love each other," said Jesus. What? That makes as much sense as a mother telling her two small boys after a quarrel to "kiss and make up." That's ridiculous! But, perhaps we find it difficult to understand this command because we find it so difficult to understand love.

Jesus' command offers a new standard, and a new guide for life--a new measuring stick. Love is learned in relationship. The love, here, is the love of Christ, and the command is to love others as Christ loved, and that is learned behavior. It is not a matter of natural instinct.

To obey the command to love, is to allow Jesus to be the measuring stick of our lives, for he is both the source and the standard of the new life that we, as Christian believers, receive. Our love for one another is also to be the hallmark of our relationship together here in the church. The church that loves, bears the image of Christ and shares the ministry of Christ. The church that loves makes Christian love possible in the world, and through that church, the world still encounters Jesus.

When we love as Christ loved, we grow into God's image, and we reflect the love of God in ways nothing can measure.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, help us to live into the image in which we were created. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of you, Our Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, strengthen us to be a church that loves. Amen.

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Jesus’ last words to the disciples and to all his followers, was the promise of peace. The gospel lesson today suggests that peace is the sign and seal of our lord's presence and his abiding gift.

We all search for peace. Perhaps that is what brings us together here each week. We search for contentment, for something to help us sleep better at night, and for something to get us through the next day. We seek release from worry. We seek release from danger.

As parents, we may have yearned for something to help us cope with squirming children. We may have yearned for something to help us cope with an inattentive or self-consuming spouse. We may have yearned for something to cope with soaked fields we could not plow or disc. We may have yearned for something to help us cope with an irritated customer. All our adult lives, I would bet, we have looked for peace as we define it: ease and comfort, an absence from conflict, and a freedom from worries.

Sometimes it seems that we have found Peace. Sometimes we seek to find it ourselves.

This past week, Mary and I took our motor home down to the Ames/Des Moines area in order for Mary to have a place to stay during her Iowa Bandmasters Association convention, and for me to catch up on a number of things: I wanted to plan a preaching schedule for the summer, catch up on some reading, and work on a publication that is in its final stage. We also planned to spend some quality time with our son, Allen, who is working in Ames this summer.

I understand that the weather was not too oppressive here this week, but the weather in central Iowa this past Wednesday, Thursday and Friday was dangerous. The winds increased to gale force by Thursday, and violent storms erupted on Friday. (I could spend an hour or two describing what it was like.) Yesterday morning the storms stopped, but all I could think of was getting home to a secure and peaceful place.

Saturday morning was lovely. I awoke and, after breakfast, prepared to go home. Mary said, “But it's such a lovely day—can’t we stay for the day?” Well, there had been three miserable days before, and yes, Saturday was a lovely day at last, but it was also a lovely day to go back home. I yearned to go back to a trusted and stayed place: a place I understand, a place I hoped had not been blown away by high winds, a place where I could sleep better at night.

Where do you seek peace?
Years ago I read about a minister who served two inner-city churches. He received a call that one of his churches had been broken into. He rushed over to see what was missing, and went through the building with another church member and a police officer. They decided that everything was fine. Soon, the police officer left, and the two began to clean up. When the pastor and church member left the church, the pastor discovered that his car had been broken into, and the robber was still inside the car. Running toward the car, the pastor yelled at the guy, who then pointed a gun at him. The pastor reported that he was not certain who was more frightened at whom. Fortunately, the robber got out of the car and ran. Later, the pastor reported that a number of his church members said to him, "Somebody was sure watching out for you."

He replied, “I assumed God was watching out for me.” That was his first assumption, which was quoted in the local paper, and it was comforting. Then he wondered about the attitude he might have had about God if that guy had pulled the trigger.

Our salvation, our peace, is not a shield that protects us. Rather, it is a force that empowers us. Our peace is a confidence that God is God, that God loves the world, that God is for us and not against us, and that, through Christ, God has made that love real and visible.

Our peace is nothing more or less than the certainty of God's presence in all of life. That is a peace that the world cannot give, but that is a peace the Church of Jesus Christ knows.

Let us pray.

God of all grace and blessing, grant that your face may shine upon us, that your way may be made known, and that your people may praise you, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

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Easter 7
Ascension Sunday
Date: 24 May 1998
Title: “The Vantage Point”

I have never preached a sermon on the Ascension, for a number of reasons. Last year, for instance, this particular Sunday on the Christian Calendar was Mothers' Day. In other years, I sometimes picked a theme for Memorial Day Weekend. One hesitation I have with the topic of Ascension is, I suppose, due to the fact that the topic can seem a little embarrassing, and there is a tendency on my part to be somewhat apologetic about preaching on this topic. You see, just forty days ago or so, it was Easter, and we declared, "Christ is risen!" Now, with today's gospel lesson, we appear to have some doubts as to
just how high up Christ was raised. How high do you think he got? This is a problem we have with Luke's chronology, which he separates into identifiable actions:

1. Resurrection,
2. Ascension,
3. Empowerment.

If we read the gospel according to John, these events are not separated; they are unified, making the situation less complicated.

We, today, also have a problem reading the Luke account, because of our modern, scientific worldview, which compels most of us to explain everything. Is the Ascension of Christ explainable? We modern folk either appear to be confused about what happened to the body, or we become condescending about the lack of sophistication we all have when it comes to understanding the problems we always face as we interpret the Bible.

So, let us consider Christ's Ascension. Nearly every week we recite a creed that includes the words from Acts 1:9: "He ascended into heaven." Did he? Did the Risen Christ ascend into heaven? How did he do that? Where is heaven? What is heaven? Is it a place? Is it a spiritual condition? Can we know what it is, or where it is?

God is Spirit, the Bible says. "God is Spirit," means God is without a body—without parts or passions. So, what do we mean in the creed when we say that Christ is "seated at the right hand of the Father?" We cannot mean these things literally, because, as an old spiritual puts it, God has no hands but yours and mine.

So, what is the story of the Ascension? Is this story history? Is it allegory? Is it just part of an extended metaphor? Did Christ really ascend? Suppose that Christ did go up into the heavens. Suppose it was an actual case of self-levitation. What difference does it make to you or me? This is an extraordinary story, and if it is a fact, then it is a very interesting fact, and calls for careful scientific investigation and a search to see if any similar cases are recorded in history, and, if there are, to study the common features, and to find out what general law governs such occurrences.

The Bible tells us that Elijah went up in a whirlwind into heaven, but that is not very certain history. That doesn't help very much. Also, today, the 24th of May 1998, why should it be considered necessary for the health of my soul to believe that Jesus Christ self-levitated from this earth two thousand years ago, and went upwards into space until he was out of sight?

So, the question I will leave with you, is, "Did it happen," and what difference does it make if it did?

Did it happen? The only evidence that we have is the picture Luke draws for us. John does not give us such a picture. Matthew does not. The end of Mark does not. Mark gives us only this fact: "He was taken up into Heaven and sat down at the right hand of God."
Obviously, the second part of Mark's statement, "sat down at the right hand of God," is symbolic, as we have already mentioned, so why not the first part? How can we tell if it is symbolic or not? This is a cold question, isn't it? It kind of gives the whole show away, doesn't it?

The Christian Creed often seems NOT to be a wash and wear garment. You put it in hot water and it shrinks until there is nothing left of it. In the Ascension story nothing is left, save this splendid but shadowy figure who fades away into the mists of time, and leaves us alone with wars, and lousy jobs, and dysfunctional families, and crime, and crumbling neighborhoods--alone in a modern mechanical and technological and vulgar world of sordid realities.

Dear Lord, these tales of unbearable beauty, how do they fit into such a world? Do we not need visions of something better? Do we not need our dreams?

I have discovered an amazing thing about the Ascension in the prayers that have been used by the Church on Ascension Day. One very ancient prayer is found in nearly every tradition. Please notice the motion, the movement, the action, and the direction of these words. They remind me of something that happened to me one day when I was jacking up my boat trailer in order to pull off the wheels and repack the wheel bearings. I had to use a funny little jack from my old Pontiac Sunbird, because it was the only one that I could slide under the very low trailer axle frame. And we all know how a jack works. You pump it up one inch, and it falls back 1/2 inch (act out). One side of the trailer inched its way upward, but soon the board I put under the jack pushed into the ground, because of the great weight of the boat, and, just as the wheel rose off the ground, the jack slipped out, and the trailer banged back to earth. (This reminds me of a sign I saw not long ago: GRAVITY: IT'S THE LAW!) Fortunately, I was able to stay clear.

So, as I read this prayer, notice what happens, will you. Notice the movement, and listen for the moment when the jack slips out:

Almighty God, whose blessed son our Savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things: Mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promise, he abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Re-read and act out.)

We don't need to have a first-century view of the universe or even a twentieth century view to understand the message of this prayer. Our Savior ascends far above anything we know and then he is back. Therefore, the perception we need is not one of an imaginary escape of the risen Christ into the heavens, but, rather, of a realized presence of Christ right here, right now.

The great theologian, Karl Barth, suggested that what changes about Christ in the mystery of the Ascension is simply the place, the vantage point. Christ moves from a human place to a divine place, but does not cease to be human, just as he did not cease to be divine in the human place. To concentrate on the direction of the movement in a
spatial sense, is to miss the point. Isn’t that cool? Isn’t that gentle and simple enough to get our attention? Christ does not cease to be human in the divine place, just as Christ did not cease to be divine in the human place.

Such a simple explanation may not be apparent when one considers that Barth's theology takes up 37 thick volumes. (I recall, as I was reading in one of Barth's 37 volumes during my seminary years, finding a footnote, in very fine print, that was 42 pages long. Talk about detail!) But let me tell more about Barth, and about how down to earth he could be. Many years ago, before I attended seminary, Barth was lecturing at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and, at the conclusion of a long lecture, Barth asked the seminarians if they had any questions. One smart aleck raised his hand and asked, "Professor Barth, can you summarize your theology contained in your 37 volumes in just one sentence?"

Barth paused, then looked directly at the student and said, "Yes, I think I can. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Let us pray. (Read the collect above once again.).

Trinity Sunday
Date: 07 June 1998
Title: “Communicating Gently”
Text: John 16:12-15

Today is Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is the foundation of the Christian faith, and yet it is certainly not something that is easily explained, nor is the Trinity easy to describe. Nevertheless, let’s see how far we can get with the Trinity today.

Recently I ran across some "cowboy theology," as it is called, from the folklore of the American Southwest, with observations that are succinct and to the point. Cowboys, like the rest of us, come in all types. Like our talk, cowboy talk about God the Creator of all, is perhaps the easiest to consider. For the skeptic, however, who has doubts about the existence of God, we might consider a story about two cowboys who were lounging around their campfire one night. They had finished a hard day on the trail, and had just stretched out with their heads on their saddles for a few minutes of stargazing and idle conversation before drifting off to sleep. It was one of those typically clear Southwestern nights, when the stars appear by the thousands, the Milky Way glows dramatically, and an occasional meteor is seen streaking across the heavens.

Drawn by the incredible beauty above them, the two cowboys began to discuss the nature and origin of it all. One cowboy, a skeptic, was entranced by the beauty, but stubbornly insisted that it just did not seem necessary to assume that a God was around to create it all. His believer friend said, "Look, Partner, I don't know of any way I'm going to be able
to prove God made all this, but do you really think that what we're seeing up there just happened by accident?"

Is Creation an accident, or is it the deliberate act of a creative and awesome God? Is God the Creator of all?

The second article of the Trinity, God the Son, is a little more difficult to understand. Few people have difficulty with Jesus the great teacher, and prophet, but why, they ask, would God have to become human and live among humans?

Again, cowboy theology offers a story of a ranch hand who considered himself very much a doubter on the issue of the divinity of Christ. One Christmas Eve, all the wranglers except this one went to church. A terrible blizzard came blowing in from the northwest. Out in the corral by the bunkhouse were some wild young calves that had been brought in from the range just a day before. Being a conscientious stockman, the young cowboy bundled up and went out to the corral to open up the barn so the calves could get warm and be fed.

Unfortunately, the calves were still so wild that he could not get near enough to them to herd them into the barn, and he couldn't lure them in with hay or feed. After a very frustrating and freezing hour, without getting a single calf into the warmth of a shelter, the cowboy went back into the house, stoked the stove, turned on the radio, and poured a cup of hot coffee. As he sat there, he said to himself, "I guess they just can't relate to a human being yet. If I could just have become a calf for a few minutes, I could have been with them and led them into the shelter." Just then, as the story goes, he heard the tune and words of the carol "Silent Night" over the radio and he experienced a moment of crystal clarity concerning God sending his Son as one that human beings could recognize and trust and follow.

And finally there is the most difficult aspect of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, whose work I like to summarize, as I did last year, with the words of one of my seminary professors: "The Spirit is what the Spirit does."

Is the work of the Spirit really mysterious? Here are the words of a cowboy preacher: "When you get a wild horse off the range, you've got a handful of kicking, stomping, biting, resentment and fury. Contrary to the Hollywood myth, you don't just slap a saddle on him, and try to ride him into submission--at least you don't do that unless you are looking for rodeo stock, instead of a trusted working horse and partner. Instead, what you do is begin to communicate with the horse. You talk to him; you feed and water him, and when you can, you begin to touch him gently. A bond develops, and horse and man become a unit able to rope calves, round-up strays, chase coyotes, together, with one will and one purpose. Isn't that what the Holy Spirit does for us: the Spirit is a gentling, feeding, reassuring voice--a touch, a presence that lets us learn to be the kind of creature God needs us to be."

So, there we have the cowboy Trinity: God the Father and Creator, which is a more likely
explanation of creation than to call it all an accident; God the Son, who became one of us to lead us to safety instead of herding us along as a strange and frightening being; And God the Holy Spirit, whose gentle, comforting, sustaining touch communicates God's care for us.

In closing, I would like us to sing together an ancient hymn from the 4th century, as a meditation on the Trinity. [“I Bind Unto Myself Today,” Words: Att. Patrick (372-466), Music: St. Patrick’s Breastplate, Irish melody; adapt. Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924).]

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Proper 11
Date: 19 July 1998
Title: “The Good and the Necessarily Better”

Last week, we meditated on the story of the Good Samaritan. One of the points of the Good Samaritan story is that sometimes, when God is so obviously absent, and the needs of neighbors are so obviously present, it seems as though the Christian faith has only one significant point of contact with reality, and that is as it affirms love, compassion, and justice as they relate to the oppressed, the poor and the outcast. Humanitarian service is the essence of Christian faith! Isn't it very odd then, that, immediately following the story of the Good Samaritan—a story told by Jesus, Luke tells another story about Jesus and two sisters named Martha and Mary?

The story is about Martha's busy service and Mary's quiet contemplation, and it is truly a startling challenge to the view of humanitarian service presented in the story of the Good Samaritan. In the story of the Good Samaritan, service to neighbor is equivalent to service to God. We read on, however, and we are introduced to a character whose highly useful activity distracts from a story about the true meaning of a person's work.

Martha did nothing bad, nothing wrong, but she is pictured as one who was distracted by her busy-ness to the point of being extravagant. She was such a fuss-budget that even with all her effort she was not giving really effective service. She is portrayed as being anxious and troubled, preparing an overly elaborate meal when a simpler one would have been more appropriate, and she was, thus, wasteful, because she lost the perspective in which all her activities must be viewed.

We who hear this story can also become distracted. Too often I have heard or read fundamental interpretations of the Martha/Mary story, which go to the extreme side of the argument to insist that nothing is more important than hearing the words of Jesus: Nothing we do is quite as important as what we hear and what we believe. When we look at Luke's entire gospel, however, we know that is not true. Listening is never an end in itself, and the entire New Testament attests to that. Following in the way of Christ means both hearing and
So what do we really have in the Martha/Mary story? We have a simple contrast: a contrast between industrious, busybody service to the Lord, and a more educated service to the Lord. One is good. The other is better. What Martha does is good. She does nothing bad, but she is portrayed as doing less than her best. Her service is lovely. She is the perfect hostess. She just left one thing out: her guest. Mary was not a perfect hostess, but she did pay attention to the guest.

Much of life seems to pressure us to compare things as if the only choice is between what is good and what is bad or evil. There are, however, degrees of goodness, just as there are degrees of badness. The Martha/Mary story deals with degrees of goodness: we are not dealing with anything evil here, so, it is very easy to miss the point.

For a number of years I was an associate at a hardware store where I worked part-time. Most of the hand tools, especially the garden tools, were marked with a tag that listed GOOD, BETTER, BEST, and each tool had one of the three gradings circled on the tag. Which do you think was the most expensive: the shovel marked BEST, or the one marked GOOD; the one with the thirty-day warranty or the one with the lifetime warranty? (Would someone like to make a wild guess here?) They were all good shovels. They were all good quality tools, but some were better.

I recall when, after we were married, Mary and I bought our first new car together. All the automobiles we looked at were good cars. We liked every single car we drove, and we drove quite a few, but one in particular, in the same price range as the others, seemed to be better: it was roomier; it had a bigger engine, a larger trunk, more safety features, and it seemed to be more comfortable. They all were good cars, but some were better than others, and one car in particular seemed to be the best choice.

We might also apply this topic to our most personal lives. I can recall that when I was a young man, all of the young women I dated were good kissers, but some were better than others. That illustration has probably gotten me into some trouble, so I will not elaborate on it any further.

Much of life is spent choosing between what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. But what about choosing between what is good and what is necessarily better, and between what is better and what is best? These are choices that Christians need to make, but often fail to make, because we too often think that GOOD is good enough.

Jesus evidently approved of what Martha did. There is nothing to lead us to believe that he did not. As we look at both Martha and Mary, however, who both encountered Jesus, we are called to recognize the difference between what is good, and what is necessarily better, and we are expected to act appropriately.

As Christians, I think, we can and we should sympathize with Martha, but as we do, we, like Mary, must also stand before Jesus, and welcome him into our lives, and hear his words.
Our call to serve the Lord is not just a call to industrious service. It is a call to educated service, and a call to recognize the difference between what is good, and what is necessarily better.

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Proper 13
Date: 02 August 1998
Title: “Living the Kingdom Come”

The heart of the gospel lesson this morning is the parable, which is a story that should disturb anyone who listens to it carefully. The parable is about the real substance of life, but in the form of a critique of a life of sheer materialism. And Jesus, as always, refuses to become involved in a controversy over "things." The kingdom he is concerned about building is the Kingdom of God, not a kingdom of consumption or possession.

Human beings spend a great deal of time building kingdoms. Like the rich fool in today's lesson, they work for that which parishes. They pray for material blessings that will not last. They save things that cannot save them.

So much for the rich! What about the rest of us? Like Robin Hood, some people expect Christianity to do nothing but redistribute the wealth of the world. The poor are often more covetous than the wealthy, and as much in bondage to the tyranny of things as the rich fool in today’s lesson. And so it is that today's lessons gather us all in: the "have-nots" who want their share, and the "haves" who intend to keep it all. In both extremes we find evidence of covetousness and greed that can cause us all to neglect the best gifts of all.

I continually meet people who build little kingdoms around their businesses, or their jobs, or their professions. I must admit that when I was a full-time pastor it was so easy to build a kingdom around my profession, limiting my friendships to people in the same profession, with the same interests and the same goals. But, I have never had the desire or the knack for being a charismatic cult builder. Some of my colleagues certainly have.

Years ago, a pastor in a neighboring community struck out on a kingdom building project that led him to nothing but scabs and scars. He knew everything about the Kingdom of God and he was not about to cave in to the worldly ways of the people in his congregation. His youth group was going to study the Bible. There would be no more debates or discussion groups followed by a trip to the local Dairy Queen or, God forbid, to the bowling alley. And the church bazaar that had been the mainstay of the church's local mission budget, as well as a generous piggy bank for the church when debts exceeded income, well--it was about time to get the money changers out of the church basement. This was going to be a tithing church.
You guessed it, since the money of sinners was no longer needed, the money changers who ran the bazaar in the church basement decided that the church would be better off without their money also.

I was reading about a similar church battle recently. One objective, old-time church member had little to say about his church's battle, but he made a good point. He asked another church member, "Ever see what happens to a wounded chicken?" I knew exactly what would follow, because I'd seen it when I was kid. "An ugly thing that," continued the man in the story. “Poor creature, already scraped to blood on a barbed wire or some such. Then all the others start pecking at the blood. And pecking and pecking until there's nothing left but scab and scar tissue. Ugly thing to be pecked to death. Mean cruel, ugly thing."

The charismatic kingdom building pastor that I knew had been no more a Christian than Genghis Khan was. He was trying to build a little kingdom. But, his congregation had also built one and they were not about to surrender it. The result--just scab and scar tissue.

Many people build little kingdoms around their families. Somebody--anybody, is wronged in the community, and the whole family turns into a hornets nest, striking out against anyone who comes near them.

We who live in small towns know that small towns are little kingdoms: little kingdoms with big, high walls protecting a shared vision of the good and simple life. We might watch the evening news and thank God that we have not had any muggings or murders such as they are reported nearly every day in Rochester, and Mason City and Waterloo. But, if Riceville is anything like Nashua, people still wound others and maim them with their picking and pecking. Their lives get all tangled up--family, work, school, play--it all becomes the same foolish thing. Then they grow silent. Then they shun one another. And it's almost like a single human body shutting down one of its major bodily systems. And the whole thing, from the loss of the part, begins to suffer and rot.

Our world, our nation, our communities, our families, and we ourselves as individuals, need more praying and less picking. We need more hands holding hands, and less pecking. We need more breaking bread together, and fewer broken hearts.

There are problems to be solved in each human relationship, and in each family, and in every community. The cost of solving them can be great, both the human cost and the social cost. Principles might have to be compromised. But the wise word of God is that this can all be done without costing the greater Kingdom: without loosing the love, and without loosing the respect and the dignity that rightfully belong to us all as children of God. There will always be risks--but they will never be more than the risks of LIVING THE KINGDOM COME for which we pray every week: --the risk of loving our enemies, --the risk of praying for those who would be very happy if we drop dead tomorrow, --the risk of either speaking well of others, or just keeping our mouths shut.
We must risk the little kingdoms, if we are to live in the greater Kingdom of God that is come, that is coming, even here, even now.

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Proper 14
Date: 09 August 1998
Title: “You’re Ready. So, Go Ahead.”

After last week's disturbing gospel parable about the rich fool, it is comforting this week to hear words of comfort coming from our Lord. Jesus tells his followers not to worry about the radical character of discipleship. All they really need to do is prepare themselves. They need to be ready. They need to be dressed for action. Like a scoutmaster preparing his troop for an extended camping trip, he encourages them to "be prepared." If they are adequately prepared, they will have nothing to worry about. There is also a caution here to avoid packing unnecessary things.

Anyone who has carried a backpack a long distance knows the need to pack as light as possible. A hiker needs to take what he needs, but nothing else. Otherwise he or she may be well supplied, but NOT prepared.

I well remember my Boy Scout patrol adviser having us UNPACK our backpacks at a patrol meeting and then pack them again under his supervision. As the patrol leader, I at first thought he was just being really picky, but I soon learned that he was helping us to be better prepared. We were going into the Bear Mountains in New York State for a winter weekend camping trip and the weather forecast was for rather cold temperatures and, possibly, snow. We were going anyway.

Uncle Jimmy's patrol did this every winter. He had us pack our bags according to his list of recommended things for winter camping, but he did not assume that each of us would be fully prepared, so he required all of us to bring our packed backpacks to his house for a patrol meeting the night before our departure, and, one by one, we unpacked our packs and arranged the contents on the living room carpet before Uncle Jimmy's discriminating eyes. Not one of us passed inspection.

"Don't forget, guys," cautioned Uncle Jimmy, our advisor, "you're going to have to tie your winter sleeping bags on top of all this. How much do you think you can carry for three miles through the mountains?" Most of us had the necessities on the list and each of us had to carry a portion of our general supplies, mainly food, but the floor was littered with things that we did not need, that were not on the list, and, that if included, would have either crippled us on our long hike into the remote camp site, or would have been jettisoned along the trail before we hiked the first mile.

When we were done re-packing, we strapped on our sleeping bags, and put on our packs,
and Uncle Jimmy helped us to adjust the straps properly. "Now you're ready," he declared. "Get to bed early. Eat a good breakfast and be here at 6:00 a.m. sharp."

I had several rookies in my patrol that year who had not been on a winter camping trip before, and, although they were excited, they had also been a little anxious, and their parents must have been even more anxious, judging form all the stuff the parents had insisted the kids take on the trip. Now, we were ready, with much less.

"Don't be anxious. You're ready," said Jesus to his friends.

A couple of weeks ago, I was gathering two sailing crews of Sea Explorers for an afternoon of sailing on Cedar Lake. I usually pull the scout boat with my truck and drive around town quickly at the appointed hour to pick up whoever needs a ride, and the scouts hop in the back, and off we go. One of the high school-aged members (most of the Sea Explorers this year are college-aged) came flying out his front door and leaped into the truck. I started to pull away, but then stopped as I looked in the rear-view mirror. "Matt, you got a swim suit on under those baggy jeans?" (You know about those huge baggy jeans some of the kids wear--on top of that he had one of those long oversized tee shirts, and he was wearing sneakers the size of one of the catamaran pontoons--nothing he had on was safe or practical for sailing on a catamaran.)

"Naw," he replied.

"Did you want to go sailing today?"

"Yeah."

"Where's your life jacket, where's your hat, where are your aqua socks--if you put a couple of ores in one of those high top sneakers we could use it for a life boat--Did you bring sunscreen? Water?"

"UGH, I forgot."

"Well," I said, "loose all that dangerous clothing and see how fast you can get your [person] back into this truck or we're going to sail without you." He was in and out of the front door in a flash with the few sensible things he needed, and, then, he was ready.

It's always interesting when one of the Sea Explorers takes the tiller for the first time. I try to make sure they're ready before they become the skipper, and we have never tipped over. But, the first time at the tiller, most of the scouts are rather anxious. "Don't worry. You're ready for this," I will tell them. "You're ready, go ahead." By then they've learned to move on the boat, and to keep the sails safely full of wind, and they do just fine.

Matt, the kid I mentioned before, got a sunfish two years ago, and wanted to learn to sail it. His smother came down to the park to watch us take it out the first time. I took the helm, but after a time, I asked Matt to take over. "Naw, not yet." The scout catamaran
was very stable, but the sunfish heeled severely, and I guess he was afraid of dumping it over.

"Don't worry. You're ready. Try it!"

"O.K." As soon as he took the tiller in his hand, we bared away into the heavy wind, and nearly capsized. The wind passed over the stern, which is called a jibe, and we nearly dumped over as the boom dipped into the water, then off we went in the other direction, and this happened several times. Then, suddenly, Matt had control, just like that, and we sailed to the north end of the lake and back with no problem. He was ready.

However, when we got back to the dock, his mother said, "I didn't think a sunfish could do figure eights like that."

“Mom,” said Matt, "it's not supposed to." I admit, things got very interesting for a few moments, but Matt was ready--he was ready to test his ability--and, as a result, he replaced his fear with confidence, and his sometimes-foolhardy teenaged ways with a sense of readiness.

Something like that goes on in all of life. “Don't be anxious,” said Jesus. "Don't be frantic." That is Jesus’ first teaching in today's lesson.

The second teaching is, "Don't be lazy, either. Don't be indifferent." If you want to be ready to do something, if you want to be ready for anything, especially for God's decisive action in your life, then don't put off doing what needs to be done. "You're ready. So, go ahead."

No matter when God acts, those who are prepared will be blessed. That was Jesus’ basic message to his disciples. Those who go ahead, actively doing the work of God's Kingdom, instead of just waiting around while doing no wrong, will be blessed. Don't put off doing what needs to be done. You're ready. So, go ahead.

There is an interesting story about Francis of Assisi, known as St. Francis to many Christians, who was always ready to do what he believed needed doing. One day Francis was hoeing his garden. The garden needed to be hoed and he was hoeing it. A devout pilgrim stopped to ask the monk, "What would you do if you knew you had only one day to live?" Francis replied, "I would keep on hoeing my garden."

How good it is to be ready, to have our houses in order, and our lives in order, actively doing God's will, and not just waiting around.

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Proper 15  
Date: 19 August 1998  
Title: “Reading the Weather”
How do you interpret time?

The first part of today's gospel lesson concerns an obvious distinction between what is morally correct and what is politically expedient. The third part of the lesson is about settling with a legal opponent, especially when you are on the wrong side of the argument. But what about the middle section--about interpreting time? How do you interpret time?

The New Revised Standard Version reads: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain;’ and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat;’ and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

(Ouch!)

I would like to offer my own translation of this passage: “When you see a huge anvil cloud rising in the west, you might assume that it could rain. And when you feel a strong, dry, southwest wind blowing, you might assume that it could get hotter. So, since you know how to interpret the weather, why can't you interpret the results of your own actions?”

We know that Jesus had a message about the coming kingdom to present here, but we also know that his message about a future kingdom was based upon the opportunities and the possibilities of his time--the opportunities and the possibilities of his day. People, then, were living as people now; living day to day, primarily--making a living--getting through--getting by.

How do people interpret time? Do most people, even people of faith, spend as much time interpreting their day to day actions as they interpret the weather?

As Dr. Samuel Johnson wrote in the 18th century, "When two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather." It sounds to me that Dr. Johnson could just as easily be describing anyone anywhere today. People interpret the weather, but what about the times.

Truthfully, I am so sick and tired of listening to weather forecasts. Since the National Weather Service was dismantled during the 1980's, one is better off just looking out the window, or, better yet, looking out the window and then checking his or her own barometer and thermometer.

As far as interpreting the times is concerned, would we rather leave that to the political pundits and the news media? Perhaps tomorrow we will learn what William Clinton has
to say instead of what the pundits forecast and what the news media commentators expect him to say about anticipated questions concerning alleged activities. Shouldn't the citizens of this nation be concerned at least as much about their own activities and the consequences of their actions?

The news media has been buzzing. They are just like the rest of us: good at looking up into the sky to interpret the weather; not so good at interpreting their own actions. For the past week, the media's approach to the president's testimony tomorrow has been sort of like the old take-off on an Hispanic weather forecast: "Chili today, and hot tamale!" Well, maybe not.

There are a great many people, not just in the media, who run all over this world trying to get behind the weather, so to speak. The image is one Joseph Conrad wrote about in his famous book, Typhoon--about sailors, who must face a storm, first, by trying to sail out of its path, then, when the storm comes upon them anyway, bearing out the storm as best they can. Only then, will they enjoy the calm that comes after the storm. The sea story is about facing the inevitable, doing one's best under the circumstances, and then offering thanks, because there is no alternative.

But most of life's storms can be avoided. Just as a person who lives in a secure house can brace for the torrent, so can most of us brace for the storms of life. It's a matter of planning and of being prepared.

There's a story from Indiana about a man who was motoring through a rural town and stopped at a country store for a soda. On the door was a sign: "This store will be closed August 23 on account of the weather." It was August 15th. The man asked the proprietor how he could know what the weather would be so far in advance. "Well," said the proprietor, "if she rains light, I'm going fishing. If she rains heavy, I'm going to stay home and work on my tackle."

"But how do you know it's going to rain?" asked the man. "Don't care if it rains or not," explained the store-keeper, "if it's sunny I'll go fishing or work on my tackle anyway. "T'all depends on the weather." Here is a story about a man who, perhaps, never heard Charles Dudley Warner's quote, "Everybody talks about the weather but nobody does anything about it."

How is it that we can so easily sense the meaning of the weather, and yet, be so inept when it comes to interpreting our own actions from day to day? How can we be so blind--so dull?

We can wake up every morning and, in spite of the previous day's forecast, learn about the new situation, and discern, and go forth and live with the weather for the day. We do that every day. And, the weather changes every day. God's will for us remains the same. Why then is it so difficult to learn and discern and live according to God's will?

Well, it isn't!
Everybody tries to learn and discern the weather, but nobody can do a thing about it. Let us rather, learn and discern the predictable Word of God.

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Proper 16  
Date: 23 August 1998  
Title: “Christian Hospitality”  
Text: Luke 13:10-17

Whenever I read one of the healing stories, I always want to ask two questions. First: Why did Jesus heal so few people? After all, Jesus lived in a land of suffering. Why, then, did he heal so few people?

Second: When Jesus did heal someone, for what did he heal that person? Were those whom he healed to renew some quest? If so, a quest for what? The second question is easier to answer than the first, so we might begin there.

The text makes it clear that when the woman was healed, she immediately "straightened up and praised God." We learn here that Jesus did not simply make the woman well enough to be rid of her discomfort. He healed the whole person, so that the renewed person could renew her quest for life completely, which included praising God. For Jesus, the minimum was never enough.

With this in mind, let's turn to the first question. Why were so few people healed? Will today's parable help us answer this question?

This is the last time we find Jesus working in a synagogue, which is a way of saying that this is the last time we find him working in the midst of a bunch of church people. The group of church people in today's lesson seems to incorporate all the worst possible characteristics of so-called "church people."

The healing that Jesus does is controversial. Why? Because it violated the religious sensibilities of the church people! The ruler of the synagogue was the most rigid among the church people, to the point of appearing to be not only rigid in his religiosity, but rigid to the point of being unimaginative, and, worse yet, unloving.

People are always in danger of loving systems more than individuals, and, obviously, the congregation that Jesus faced, loved its religious system very much. They knew that the woman had suffered for eighteen years, so why couldn't she be healed tomorrow? What was the big rush? Why break the Sabbath?

Jesus, who valued the life of every person, automatically chose the individual over the system. In his presence, the needs of people come before the laws of systems, even the
systems of the genuinely religious.

We, too, live in an age where the genuinely religious often demonstrate nothing more than the shameful failure of rigid religion. Years ago we had the so-called Moral Majority. Today we have the Christian Coalition. They are not affiliated with any particular Christian denomination, thank God, but they certainly represent rigid religion at its worst. They have carefully defined political platforms, but if you look for compassionate concern for the needy, you will find none.

What comes first: the needs of individuals, or the laws of the system? Jesus’ priorities were obvious, and from them, I believe, we can clearly distinguish between so-called "religious people" and "Christian people;" between people who service systems and people who service others.

During Jesus’ day, in some areas of Palestine, cattle were more important than women. Therefore, as a woman, the character in the healing story was in a kind of double jeopardy. She had two strikes against her: she was not only suffering physically, she was also a woman. Also, the laws of the rigid religion of the time were incredibly detailed. For instance, a farmer was allowed to take water to his ox, for the ox to drink on the Sabbath, with the understanding that if the animal did not have water it might die, but, he was not allowed to raise the bucket up to the ox's mouth so that it could drink. The carrying of water was necessary, and therefore allowable by Jewish law, but the act of kindness was not, because that would be considered work, and would cause the farmer to break the Sabbath.

Elsewhere, we find Jesus in a similar situation, surrounded by a rigid religious system, and he asked, was the Sabbath created for people, or people for the Sabbath? Was the Sabbath created to help us become more caring, more compassionate, more understanding, more loving, or to become less so? To become more human, or less? To reflect more of the image of God, or less?

We who gather as a congregation here each Sunday morning know why we are here. We come here regularly so that we may reflect more of the image of God, week by week. Not less!

We know that God's love is very regular. It is very predictable in that it always occurs naturally, not by mere prescription. Human rules do not regulate God. Furthermore, God's grace is seldom seen in systems; it is seen in the actions of individual people like you and me, through the compassion we display in God's name.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Lord, we come from all directions and circumstances to worship you this morning. We come before you humbly. You have so much here for us, because you sent Jesus to give us a covenant of your love. Help us to experience your grace, as Jesus did, by living our lives graciously. Do not withhold from us any good thing in this hour or in
We all know that today's familiar gospel lesson deals with humility versus pride, and that it presents an opportunity to discuss the virtue of humility. We also know that Jesus was not always humble. As the guest of a wealthy Pharisee at a Sabbath feast, he was not very humble as he reflected upon all the posturing he observed on the part of the host's dinner guests.

The Jewish authorities had been keeping an eye on Jesus, and now Jesus was carefully observing them. Therefore, perhaps it is worthwhile to discuss the virtue of humility without trying to expel the demon, Pride, as if to do so would automatically guarantee its immediate replacement by the angel, Humility.

In the absence of Pride, other demons may stake a claim. Whether it be the demon, Greed, with its substitution of possessions for self-worth, or the demon, Sloth, choosing a life of comfort now because it has no hope for the future, both will undoubtedly have an eye on the same beach-front property that is the human soul.

We never make ourselves better by simply expelling that which demonizes, because that which rushes in to take its place may not be any more virtuous than what we expelled. For example, I've seen too many people give up drinking only to smoke excessively. And too many give up smoking only to eat themselves to death.

Should humility always be contrasted to pride? Are they opposites, or are they, perhaps, extremes of the same basic quality?

Most of us are very proud of the good we have achieved. We are proud of the accomplishments of our spouses, and of our children. Is that wrong? Most of us are very humble when it comes to admitting our frailties, our failures, and our mistakes. Is that wrong? Isn’t that OK, at least to a certain extent? Well, yes and no.

What then is humility? I know what it is not. It is not putting yourself down to the point of worthlessness. It is not an order. It is not a denial of your value as a human being. It is not a denial of your ability or of your potential. For, if it were, it would be a debasing of who God has created us to be.

The first shall be last, the last first. The exalted will be humbled, and the humbled exalted. What kind of an attitude is that?
First of all, and basically, all Jesus’ messages about the virtue of humility challenge us to take an honest look at ourselves, and to evaluate ourselves honestly. To do that, we need to examine our motives. For instance, what is our motive when we get greedy? Well, that is obvious; our motive is to get more of something.

What are the motives for our charity? Well, that is not always obvious. I have seen so much of what I call “disinterested charity” done by good people who are nevertheless mistaken in their generosity, because they think that just dumping money on a problem can solve the problem.

What are the motives for our giving? Is our charity in the same category as paying taxes--just a matter of duty?

There is a piece of an old poem I once memorized and often used during church pledge drives:

He dropped a penny in the plate  
And meekly raised his eyes,  
Glad the week's rent was duly paid  
For mansions in the skies.

Is giving just paying rent? Some give only out of self-interest. I've known colleagues of mine in the insurance business to spend a small fortune wining and dining wealthy potential clients, assuming that the big sale will eventually take place if the right combination of flattery and entertainment is flashed in front of the client.

Others give because they feel superior. I am certain that I am not the only parent here this morning who has handed money over to a son or daughter for something that the young person needed or wanted, only to add to the gift an unsolicited lecture. I have resisted this temptation so many times, that I am almost to the point of denying that it is a temptation--the temptation to say something like, "OK, so here's the money you said you need. Now, I certainly expect you to remain on the Dean's List this semester." And, worse yet, to add something like, "Mom and I love you so much."

Good heavens! The three statements, about the money, about the grades, about the love, have nothing whatsoever to do with each other.

(long pause)

And then, some people give, because they can't help it.

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Proper 18  
Date: 06 September 1998
Today's gospel lesson is a call to decisive action. The call is urgent. The tone is of an ultimatum.

Does the world we live in demand such urgency? Yes, at times it certainly does. Therefore, the world around us needs genuine people!

As the tragedy of the Swiss Air flight this past week reminds us, life has its risks, but life, to be life, must be lived now, despite all difficulties. Therefore, true life is for the genuine, not merely for the casual, or the merely curious.

Jesus indicated that he needed genuine disciples. Casual or merely curious disciples would not be adequate, because the future might catch them unprepared. But, they must count the cost. They must be confident, but not overconfident. Most of all, they need to be genuine.

During this time of year we might reflect on how the parents of a college freshman might appear genuine to their son or daughter who has now left home for the first time. What do most parents say when they leave their dear ones at a college to return to an empty home? "Have a good time. And, if you ever run out of money, just call us.” Not exactly! Perhaps that is what the young adult would like to hear, but it would certainly not be the advice of a “genuine” parent. Parents need to count the cost of their words. They need to be able to help their sons and daughters complete their plans for the future so that the future will not catch them unprepared.

So, what about being genuine? What about being a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ? What is the cost? We are dealing here, with two of Jesus’ parables, and the hyperbole is very thick, so that we can deal with this lesson on several different levels.

First, we might ask ourselves, “What will I be doing tomorrow?”

As far as the future is concerned, we, as Christians, have a great deal of advanced warning. What are we going to be doing tomorrow? After all, we know a great deal. We can probably do as well as we did yesterday. It's our future, and we want to be there. We're experienced and our experience gives us confidence, but, if you will, reflect upon this: Let’s think for a few moments about the last thoughts of the pilots on that Swiss Air flight last week.

There are times when we know exactly what the consequences of our actions may be. At other times, all we can do is our best. In emergencies, all we can usually do is respond. At other times, all we can do is act instinctively.

How then can we act decisively? Obviously, when we know what we should do, we are
better off than when we simply act instinctively. People frequently act instinctively. We know that we should be doing SOMETHING in an emergency situation, but we don't always know what to do. What is the choice in such a situation? At thirty-five thousand feet above the earth one cannot call 911.

Wherever we are, we must live now, in the moment, despite the difficulties, and we must be genuine as we make decisions that will form our lives in relation to future expectations. Fortunately, as Christians, we know what the future can mean for us: we do have a certain amount of advanced knowledge. But that can be good or not so good, depending upon our degree of confidence.

I want to be a Christian, but what are the chances? I want to be decisive in my actions today, but am I prepared? I know what I would like the future to be, but what are the chances of my being there when it happens?

Jesus said that the chances of you being there in the future, depend upon what you do now: Today! He said that our lives must be lived now, not in some indefinite future. Therefore, what can we do today so that tomorrow will not catch us unprepared?

We, as Christians, know that the call to be followers of Christ is not a casual call. Discipleship is not a casual thing; it's not a matter of curiosity; it is a matter of commitment. This past week, and this past summer season, however, we have witnessed a remarkable contrast between world views: one represented by the aftermath of the Swiss Air tragedy, which happened this past week in real time, and one represented by the story of the tragedy of the Titanic that happened long ago, and has recently been recreated on the movie screen.

What can we learn from this?

The lesson is an ultimate lesson. We human beings love our creations. But do we always count the cost? When traveling, we want to be confident, but we cannot afford to be overly confident. Traveling by airplane is, statistically speaking, safer than traveling in an automobile, but statistics don’t prevent airplanes from crashing.

When the "unsinkable" Titanic went down, only 700 or so people were saved. Yes, the ship had only enough lifeboats for half of the people on board, but the boats that were available were capable of saving more than twice as many people as they saved. Convinced of the great ocean liner's invulnerability, when the command to board the lifeboats was finally given, many passengers refused to believe that the ship was in real danger. So, the band kept on playing, and the lifeboats pulled away half empty.

Let us pray.

Lord, be merciful to us as we follow you with confidence. Be for us this day the centering place of wisdom and truth, of hope and joy, of response and repose. Amen.
The gospel lesson this morning is the beginning of a long account of the journey to Jerusalem. We immediately encounter two contrasting groups. The first is a group that is drawn to Jesus by his openness—the tax collectors and sinners. The second is a group of critics—the Pharisees and Scribes.

We then encounter two parables concerning the lost and the estranged. A shepherd searches until he finds the one lost sheep. He searches not just until dark, or until he gets tired, or hungry; he searches until he finds the sheep.

The woman searches until she finds the lost coin. She searches not until her broom wears out, or her back wears out, or her patience wears out, but until she finds the coin.

We have heard these two parables many times. Perhaps they are so familiar that we do not even stop to think about their significance.

The shepherd and the sweeper, of course, describe God's manner of dealing with sinners. And the message here is basically, and simply, that God cares for all humanity: all one hundred, all ten.

God cares especially for the lost and the estranged. We know that. That's good. When we know that, we know that God cares. That pleases us, and there is no great mystery here. But what about the diligent search process—the active seeking of each and every sinner? If a sinful life is a life out of touch with God, i.e. a life contrary to God's will, then why does God actively seek out sinners, and not just until dark, or until the broom wears out, but until they are found?

As I heard President Clinton's words that he addressed to the assembled clergy at the White House clergy breakfast this week, I sensed the work of our seeking God. All the images of today's parables fluttered before me. First of all in my mind, was the image of the lost sheep. Even the most powerful person in the civilized world can have the characteristics of a lost sheep.

We all know that sheep are not very bright. They become lost because they are so careless.

There is an old story about a sheep farmer who was leading one sheep down a lane. A city man who was driving by, stopped his car, rolled down the window and shouted, "What you got there?"
"A stray," answered the farmer.

"A stray what," questioned the city man, with an intelligence comparable to that of the sheep?

"A stray sheep," informed the farmer.

"How do sheep get lost," shouted the city man?

As the farmer approached the car, he said to the man, "They just nibble themselves lost." The farmer got closer to the car and kept explaining: "A sheep keeps his head down, and just goes from one tuft of grass to another, until it comes to a hole in the fence, and it just nibbles itself lost."

It is certainly interesting to me that Jesus seemed to prefer the term "lost," to the term "sinner," and that he avoided the term "damned." Lost, is a very inclusive term. We might pity the lost, as much as we pity a careless sheep, but we, too, harbor the same foolishness. We, too, can easily get lost in this world, and seek God in vain, forgetting that it is God who does the seeking for the lost.

So, let’s get to the point. The lost are lost when they are lost. (repeat) They cannot find God, because they are lost!

Have you ever been lost? If you have, then you know what I mean. When you are lost, you can’t do anything about the situation, because you can’t get anywhere, and no one else can do anything for you, because you are LOST!

The lost are lost when they are lost! But God is not lost!!

Surely God loves the folk who never stray away, but the joy of joys in heaven is when one lost person is found and comes home.

One of my prayers this week has been for William Clinton, that he, with all the lost, may find that it is a thousand times easier to come back to God, than to come back to the bleak criticism of people who's only advice might be to "get lost," and stay lost.

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Proper 20  
Date: 20 September 1998  
Title: “The Rascal Parable”  

In recent weeks we have heard a number of “Kingdom of God” parables in the scripture
lessons, but this morning's parable is not one of them. There is no figure (even the master) who indicates how God would do anything. The story is not simply an appeal for almsgiving, or generosity, or forgiveness, or even the proper use of wealth. Neither is it a criticism of the Jewish religious authorities of Jesus’ day, which was one of the most common uses Jesus made of parables. The parable does call our attention to a certain urgency of discipleship, as did other parables in Luke, in chapters thirteen and fifteen.

So, before we look at the dynamics of this story, let us look at the characters. Can you recall any biblical story that presents such a rascally bunch of scoundrels? First the steward looses his job as the result of embezzlement. When he knows that his job is gone, he, in turn, falsifies his master's books in order to befriend his master's debtors, thus involving them in their own misdemeanors, and also placing them in a position for eventual blackmail by the steward. When the master, the landowner, finds out what the scoundrel steward has done, we are shocked to find out that instead of the master punishing the steward, the master praises him, because of the steward's shrewdness and devious but clever and skillful conduct. So they all are no-good scoundrels. It reminds me of Steve Martin's movie of years ago, titled, "Dirty, Rotten Scoundrels."

Biblical commentaries treat this story in a number of uninteresting ways, some of them less convincing than others. As a matter of fact, before the classic Interpreters Bible launches into one of its typical apologetic meanderings, its author's ask, "Did Jesus really tell this parable, or did Luke just make it up?" So, what do we have here?

The parables of Jesus, even when they have a figure who represents the way God does something, are not allegories: they are not stories where everything means something else. They are simply parables. Therefore, perfect characters are not necessary. The only types of characters that are necessary in parables are characters like you and me and the people we know.

Surely, Jesus is not commending the dishonesty of the steward. Jesus does commend his prompt foresight. He commends his shrewdness. He commends his realism. This crook faced the facts. He did not pity himself. He did not deceive himself. He sized up the situation, and, using cold logic, he, a bad person—a bad, bad person, sets a good example.

So, what motivates people?

I have seen so many people make bad career choices, and I certainly have made my share of them. But, you know, I've seen some people choose career paths like a fool and walk along those paths very wisely. Others have carefully and wisely chosen a path and walked along it like a complete fool. So it is, I suppose, that Jesus gave us this bad man's good example to contemplate.

I have known business owners who spent extraordinary amounts of time on their businesses, and others who spent an inordinate amount of time on a hobby, or a sport, at the expense of their families and friends and even their health. One friend of mine has
two passions: golf and his business. He seems to be possessed by both. And for the life of me I cannot tell which would be his first priority and which would be second, except for the fact that he “talks” golf continually.

I enjoy playing golf once in a while, but I only like to play nine holes, and I like to walk, and either carry my clubs or pull them along on my cart. My friend is much more “with it.” He has a state-of-the-art golf cart. Nine holes? He uses the first nine holes to practice for the rest. When he is playing golf, all he talks about is golf. And when he is not playing golf, all he talks about is golf. I am certain that our friendship will last only as long as I refrain from playing golf with him. He has spent a fortune on books about golf, and on videos made by all the pros. He takes golf lessons. He goes to the driving range every week. He will sit for hours on a perfectly glorious Saturday or Sunday afternoon, watching a golf tournament on television.

What kind of a person would this already good person be, if he spent even a fraction of the time, energy, and money he spends on golf, for the most noble motives he has?

I have encountered some very sly, calculating telephone solicitors of late. Have you? Some of them come across to me as a new generation of evangelists for the products they are selling. "Mr. Mowbray," they will say, or they might pretend to be more personal; "Thomas, may I call you Tom?" And, at that point I have upon occasion replied with, "No, you may not call me Tom and you may not call me Thomas and you may not call me again."

Some telephone solicitors surprise me, though. When I have the time, I will sometimes play along with them for a while, because I like to study their lines. They are usually quite shrewd. They have a script, and they are well trained, and they are skillful and clever. You, the person they are talking to, cannot possibly get through another day without purchasing their product or service. You need it. You want it. You deserve it. You can afford it. Your life will change radically for the better if only you take a moment to answer just a few questions.

Everyone wants a better life, and a more secure life. So, we have savings accounts, and annuities, and pension plans, and IRA's, and we are prepared. But we are also the victims of the tensions of our times, and, therefore, we must act shrewdly. The way we handle our time and our money can provide us with a great deal of training. The way we handle our money, alone, is one of life's major training opportunities.

Therefore, says Jesus, if we can handle our stuff--if we can be faithful with our stuff, then perhaps God will trust us with something better. And this is how the bad man in today's parable set a good example.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, you alone are the source of peace and righteousness. Only the warmth of your Spirit can wean us from pride and cause us to work on our most noble motives.
Teach us to pray so that we may be helped by your love and guided by your wisdom. Amen.

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Proper 21
Date: 27 September 1998
Title: “An Affair of the Heart”
Text: Luke 16:19-31

Many of the most tender prayers for the souls of the departed include references to the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. One of them is the beautiful ancient hymn, "In Paradisum," which, in a modern translation reads:

Into paradise may the angels lead you.  
At your coming may the martyrs receive you,  
and bring you into the holy city Jerusalem.  
May the choirs of angels welcome you,  
and with Lazarus who once was poor  
may you have peace everlasting.

We all know the story of Lazarus, but is it not curious to note the close connection of all the glorious heavenly host with the poorest figure in scripture?

The contrasts in today's parable, remind me of a modern parable concerning a very wealthy man who, on his death bed, pleaded with God to allow the man, when he died, to bring just one of his most dear possessions to heaven. God reminds the man that he will not need earthly possessions in heaven. Nevertheless, the wealthy man pleaded relentlessly even as he repented for all his earthly sins. The dying man had belonged to a number of service organizations, and he had served on the city council for several terms, and one thing he did well as a councilman was maintain the town roads, with good curbs and sidewalks and paving.

As his hour approached, he earnestly prayed one more time with such passion, that God granted his request. "Yes," replied God, "for heaven's sake, you may bring one thing."

As the soul of the departed approached the pearly gates, the Apostle Peter stopped him. The man was struggling along the road to the gate with a four-wheeled wagon that was obviously loaded with a very heavy cargo. "What do you have there," inquired the saintly Peter?

"My one thing that God promised I could bring with me," replied the man.

"That appears to be a very heavy load. What did you bring? May I have a look," asked Peter? The man proudly unveiled his cargo: a wagon full of large ingots of gold bullion,
from the vault of a Swiss bank where he had stashed his earthly fortune.

Seeing the wagon full of gold bricks the portly Peter burst into laughter, which spread throughout the heavens until all of the heavenly host were roaring hysterically. The man's face was ashen. With a look of total bewilderment he cried, "Stop. Stop, please. What is so funny?"

The Apostle, struggling to control himself, replied, "Oh, please excuse me, and please excuse all of us for being so rude, but you see this really is humorous as well as unusual. You begged and begged for God to allow you to bring just one thing from earth to heaven, and when God finally said yes, you chose to bring pavement?" (The streets of heaven are paved with gold.)

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is a well-told story. The account is clear and coherent. Not very much is left to doubt. It was undoubtedly an old folktale in Jesus’ day and its predecessors can be found in nearly every ancient culture.

The name, Lazarus, means "God helps," or "God is my help," from the ancient name Eleazar. Dives means laterally "rich man" in Latin. Therefore, we have here, literally, an earthly contrast between the luxurious life of the rich man and the dire poverty of Lazarus; strikingly, the gap between the two characters exists despite the close physical proximity in which these two characters live.

Everything turns up side down, however, as verse twenty-two reports the death and fate of both characters. Then, there is a great reversal of the fortunes, and a consequent real gulf that separates the two.

We do not know how Dives got his wealth, but we know how he used it. We do not know if Lazarus was a good or wicked person; we know only that he was poor and suffering. Since God does not require anyone to give, Dives does not appear to be a wicked character. In fact, neither figure's moral character is examined. The only contrast is between the very rich and the very poor, but so what? Nowhere in the Bible is wealth described as necessarily wicked, nor is poverty ever described as a virtue. So, why is there such a tremendous reversal of destinies?

Surely, it was not what Dives did that got him into hell, but what he did NOT do. He was not deliberately cruel to Lazarus; he simply did not notice Lazarus. Lazarus was just part of the landscape. Dives looked at the world of suffering and need around him and thought that it was perfectly natural. There is a way of looking at suffering so that it moves some people to no feeling. We see this happening in our own country as welfare programs designed to help the poorest among us are being swept away while the wealthiest Americans receive more and more tax cuts. Just this week congress passed another bill to cut another eighty billion dollars in taxes for the wealthiest people in the country.

The same Bible that tells us that we ought always to pray, also tells us, in Jesus’ words, that "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did
it to me." Therefore, if one of the goals of our earthly journey is our heavenly journey, then giving is as important as going. The same Bible that tells us that by grace we are saved, also tells us to make darn sure that we also are capable of dispensing that same kind of grace.

Keeping is an affair of the mind: it is a natural instinct. Giving is an affair of the heart; it is not a requirement, but a choice. And that is the basis of today's story: an affair of the heart. God does not require us to give. Therefore, no one can hope to become generous; one can only choose to become so.

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Proper 22
World Communion Sunday
Date: 04 October 1998
Title: “An Antepast of Heaven”
Texts: Proper 22

All of today's lessons have something in common, although that which is common is not the presence of something, but an absence. In both the Old Testament lesson and in Psalm 137, we read of the absence of God. God has departed from Zion, and is on an extended vacation. In the lesson from second Timothy we read of the absence of Christ. We have a picture of the early Church waiting for "that day," the great day of the Lord's triumph. And the Church is still waiting, sometimes patiently, sometimes not so patiently. Every time we worship, we pray, "thy kingdom come," and we are still waiting for the reply.

When we celebrate Holy Communion, however, we pause in our waiting. Here, around this table, we lose the sense of urgency of the early Church, because, here, we celebrate the on-going presence of Christ: we celebrate Christ in our midst. Participation in this meal itself is a foretaste of heaven. As Charles Wesley, the brother of the famous Methodist, John Wesley, put it, Holy Communion is an "antepast of heaven." It is something that precedes heaven, as it were: it is a sign of our anticipation of the reign of God.

This leads us, then, to an understanding of the gospel lesson for today, which suggests that this presence of Christ, this anticipation of the reign of God, is expressed in this meal, which is one of the results of our faithful service as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Anyone who has dined in an Italian restaurant knows what "antipasto" is. It is a variety of tasty things that are served before the pasta, sometimes in such quantity that no one has any desire for the main course. "Ante", in English, means before, or prior to, and comes from the Latin "a-n-t-e." Oddly, the Italians spell the Latin "a-n-t-e," as "a-n-t-i," which in English means against.
When I was teaching English in a college in Illinois, my class had a lengthy debate about whether the Italian spelling of "antipasto" should be spelled in English as "antepasta," so that people would not think it was against the pasta. There is no English word "pasto," only "pasta," which comes from the Greek root, "paste." Therefore, concluded the class, if the menu in an Italian restaurant is in English, then the term should be "antepasta," and if the menu uses Italian terms, then it should be "antipasto" and printed in italics. This would assure the menu reader that these dishes came before the pasta course, and were not “against” it. By the time we ended our discussion, I was very sorry that I had brought up the topic, but it made for an interesting debate, and word study, and led to some very cleverly written essays.

Today we dine together celebrating the on-going presence of Christ, and thus we have a foretaste of heaven. We share together this substantial "antipasto" as an anticipation of the great Celestial Banquet. This is one of the results of our faithful service: we get to eat together.

Today we worship with Christians around the entire world with something more than feelings and thoughts and prayers.

Today we worship by doing something, and not by merely experiencing something. The Church celebration of World Communion Sunday today is an effort to worship in such a way that we find God and Christ in tangible things, so that we may be faithful to our Lord who commanded his followers to keep this feast until he comes again in glory. And what a wonderful, global celebration this is, because it is the only time that Christians do this together, simultaneously. We do not celebrate either Christmas or Easter together, because of different church calendars, but this we do together, simultaneously, once a year.

As we “keep” this bread and the contents of these cups, by consuming them this morning, and by using them to nourish our bodies, we, with all Christians throughout this planet, celebrate Christ's presence in our midst, and Christ's presence in our lives. And the answer to our prayers for the kingdom to come, is no further away than the serving of the next course.

Proper 23
Access Sunday
Date: 11 October 1998
Title: “What’s Your Handicap?”
Text: (Luke 17:11-19)

What is your handicap?

I am assuming at this moment that you are not golfers right now, nor yachtsmen about to
sail in a regatta. So, what is your handicap? If you do not think that you heard the question correctly, I will repeat it. What is YOUR handicap?

I am certain that someone here this morning is probably ready to respond with, “Why are you asking me a question like that?”

Most of us would not consider ourselves to be handicapped. We might have a slow this or a painful that, but we get by, and, as we consider the physical problems of other folk we know, we know that we are not doing so badly. There are, however, so many ways in which a person can be handicapped.

The week ahead of us has been declared "Disabilities Awareness Week." Many Christians throughout our great nation have designated this Sunday as "Access Sunday," to help others become more aware of the needs of the handicapped in our society and to appreciate together the vast strides that have been made in the general area of human rights, and in the particular area of the rights of the handicapped.

In recent years and decades most Americans have joined together to make buildings more accessible. As a society, however, even though we do our best to accommodate the handicapped, we hardly ever consider the possibility that someday we may be handicapped.

Decades ago, one of my closest high school friends was severely injured in a diving accident. Although he was confined to a wheel chair, he finished college with a degree in engineering. While I was visiting my family during my Navy years, he was visiting his family in my hometown, and we had a chance to visit with each other. He said to me, "Tom, some of us are called disabled, the rest--well, the rest are just temporarily able-bodied."

Isn't that a humbling thought, because, as each of us gets older, we know for a fact that we, all of us, are just temporarily able-bodied!

In the Bible we can read of numerous handicapped persons. From Naaman in the Old Testament, to Bartimaeus in the New Testament, they were often subjects of healings and wonderful works of God. (In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus heals ten people handicapped by the scourge of leprosy.)

In the Old Testament we can read of David taking into his care the crippled son of Jonathan when Jonathan was killed in war. In the New Testament we read about Paul's physical handicaps. We know that Paul suffered from malaria. There is strong evidence to indicate that Paul was epileptic. He stammered--he had a speech impediment--a real handicap for a preacher. He also had a very painful physical problem. Through all of his hardships, Paul worked through them with patience and determination.

If a handicapped person can do that, then why can't I? I have known a good number of handicapped people and I have continually marveled at their patience and their
While completing my doctoral studies at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, I had the privilege of studying with Dr. Robert Healey. Dr. Healey was a brilliant man, and a fascinating lecturer. He had a marvelous sense of humor, and was much in demand as a guest preacher. He was a world traveler, and had traveled not only to the places where everyone would want to go, but also to a great many places where no one would ever want to go. Dr. Healey and his wife both were handicapped. He had two deformed arms. One was so short and bent that it hid under a short-sleeved shirt. The other reached no longer than my upper arm and it had no thumb. As his teaching and his personality enthralled me, I knew that in his presence something wonderful happened to me.

During the same year I studied with Dr. Healey, I also studied with Donald Gowan of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. At one point, Dr. Gowan was leading our seminar in a study of the New Testament eschaton--the end of the present age and the advent of the new one--when the blind would receive their sight, and the lame would walk, and all would be whole and would equally share in the Kingdom that God would usher in. His point was that the end of the present time was not to be understood as some great cosmic event, but, rather, as the transformation of what we now understand as a handicapped world--a world of limitations, setbacks, and failures.

Dr. Gowan noted that, while he was preparing our lectures, he attended a handicapped awareness group meeting at his seminary in Pittsburgh. The meeting helped him to realize that there was a definite link between the biblical hope and the hope expressed by the handicapped. Furthermore, he confessed to us, in his doctoral seminar, that every person has a handicap of some kind--that everyone has something to be overcome in order for the Kingdom of God to become a reality.

He was and probably still is a widely published, popular professor, and lecturer, and a highly respected authority in his field. But, during our time together, he confessed to us his handicap--something he had struggled with all his life--his crippling shyness. He could clearly remember his mother saying to him when he was young, "Don't just stand there like a stick, go play with the other children." It wasn't as if he didn't want to play with them, he just had other things that he wanted to do. By the time I had met Dr. Gowan, it was obvious to me that he had overcome what he had once considered to be a handicap. But he got me wondering about my handicaps, and how I have worked to overcome some of them, and how I continue to need to overcome others.

There is something about the way we choose to deal with the weaker parts of our personalities that, just as with the weaker parts of our bodies, determines whether we are to remain handicapped or not. Our handicaps do not make us handicapped; it is the rest of us.

Paul Harvey's stories can still be heard on the radio. “Stay tuned for the rest of the story,” he will say. So, stay tuned, because there is more.
Who has not read about Helen Keller?

In the field of writing, nearly every great writer had a handicap of some kind. Robert Louis Stevenson suffered from Tuberculosis. Walter Scoot was lame. Byron was a cripple.

In the field of music, Beethoven wrote his greatest works after he had become deaf at the age of twenty-eight. Handel wrote the Hallelujah Chorus at the age of fifty-six after he had had a stroke that paralyzed his entire right side, and he was right handed.

In the field of engineering, the hunchback, Charles Steinmetz, became the world's leader in electrical research at the turn of the last century.

And the list goes on and on.

In many cases we find the handicapped coming to the aid of the handicapped. In 1812, little three-year-old Louis was playing with an awl in his father's harness shop in a small town in France. While poking holes in a thick piece of leather, the awl slipped and Louis lost his sight in one eye. The resulting infection spread to the other eye and he was soon completely blind. Seventeen years later, Louis Braille invented the Braille system now used by blind persons all over the world. Through a blind man, the blind received new sight.

I suppose at least one of the messages here is this: We, all of us, need to take a look at ourselves. We need to take a look at our situations. We need to, day by day, take a good thrilling look at what we want to do in life and what we want to be, AND DO IT AND BE IT.

We need to take charge of our minds. God has placed enormous power there.

The chances are that the worst foes in our lifetimes have never been hostile circumstances or physical disabilities, but rather just strong head winds such as an airplane might hope for on a runway--A GRAND FORCE TO TAKE OFF AGAINST FOR FLIGHT, if we just know how to do that.

What are my handicaps?

Never be afraid to ask yourself that question. What are my handicaps? What can I do to overcome my handicaps in order to accelerate the process of becoming a better person? Answer that question this week. What are my handicaps? For in the final analysis, that is what building the Kingdom of God is all about.

Let us pray.

Our heavenly Father, help us to know that within each of us is something greater than has
ever shown; that we have capacities and abilities, which, if released, would astonish us.
And help us to know, even as Jesus knew, that because of you, we are greater than
anything that can happen to us. Amen.

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Proper 24
Date: 18 October 1998
Title: “Ask, Believing!”

With today's parable in mind, I am tempted to paraphrase what Emerson once said about
heroism. Emerson said, "The hero is no braver than an ordinary man [person], but he is
brave five minutes longer."

My paraphrase today would be, "The nagging person is no braver than an ordinary
person; he or she just nags five minutes longer.

The New International Version of the Bible accurately titles today's parable as the parable
of the "persistent widow." The persistent widow is not necessarily perseverant, because
she shows no particular talent for patience. She is, essentially, a nagging person. She
drives the judge crazy.

We do not know the nature of the woman's complaint. We do know that she was too poor
to bribe the judge, and we know that she had no power to bully him. She was defenseless.
She had no influence. She had been wronged, and she was an object of pity.

She wins the attention of the judge simply by badgering him. She wears him down by
incessant nagging. But then, again, perhaps she nagged no more effectively than the rest
of us, but just five minutes more. And the dishonest, callous, godless magistrate caved in.

Of course, the message Jesus is presenting here is one about the passion of prayer--the
passion of prayer that is needed to overcome the evil of this world. And Jesus makes his
urgent plea with a notable sense of humor. His followers are to be like a nagging woman
of his time. His followers are to be persistent in prayer, but not necessarily perseverant,
that is, not necessarily patient. They are to take responsibility for the work of prayer.

They are to be persistent. There is an urgency about Jesus’ message. And after he tells his
story, he asks his followers, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the
earth?" In other words, if our prayers are no more than the presentation of a wish list to
God, then faith will vanish. God may just keep putting us off. If we want to get justice
quickly, and if we really trust in the goodness of God, we need to keep nagging.

Jesus told a number of stories about the necessity of urgent, and persistent prayer. Recall
if you will the story from Luke, chapter 11, about a man who knocked on his neighbor’s
door at midnight asking for bread for his guest. The unprepared host gets a blunt retort from his sleepy neighbor who has barred his door for the night. But the story tells us that the need was great, and the host continued to plague his neighbor until the neighbor reluctantly gave in. The host did not so much persevere as he stubbornly persisted, and pestered and badgered the neighbor into submission.

One of my favorite Old Testament prayer stories is about Elijah's persistent and expectant prayer. Elijah was convinced that God would answer his prayer for rain if only he sufficiently nagged at God from the top of Mount Carmel. So Elijah took a servant to the mountaintop where one could see the Mediterranean Sea over which all rain clouds formed. Elijah began his prayer in typical Old Testament fashion by bowing his head down to the earth, and he was determined not to raise his head until his prayer was answered. After praying for a time, he directed his servant to climb to the very top of the mountain and look toward the sea. The servant climbed up, climbed back down, and reported, "There is nothing."

Elijah, kept his head to the ground and prayed some more. "Go back," he directed the servant.

"There is nothing," reported the servant.

"Go back," shouted the bent over Elijah.

"There is nothing," reported the exasperated servant.

"Go back," demanded the increasingly impatient Elijah.

"There is nothing."

"Go back."

The seventh time, the servant reported, "Uh, a cloud--uh, a cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea."

In prayer, the patience of perseverance can get us just so far. Persistence may also be necessary in prayer--the persistence of people like you and me who have experienced through our everyday lives the fact that sometimes, when we are in a great rush, it is the last key on the ring that opens the door. Are we patient in such a situation? Probably not! Are we persistent? Probably, especially if we need to get the door open! Likewise, our impatience in prayer is no more a stumbling block to the progress of our faith than stumbling and falling through the rest of life. Because we know that all we need to do, as we stumble and fall through each day, is to get up one time more than we fall. All we need to do is nag five minutes longer than anyone else. “Ask, ask, ask,” said Jesus. “Knock, knock, knock, knock.” Nag, nag, nag, nag, nag.

If you have faith in the ultimate goodness of God, then persistence in prayer will work.
Ask and you will receive. Knock and the door will be opened. In other words, have faith in your faith!

Some people have faith in their talents. But nothing is more common than an unsuccessful person with great talent.

Some people have faith in their wealth. It is very sad, but very true; a great many people have faith in their stuff.

Genius? Unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education? The world is full of well-educated derelicts. These are great problems of the human race.

Instead of worrying about such problems, Jesus advised his followers to ask, and seek and knock. If no one answers, ask again. If you don't find what you need the first time, keep looking. If no one answers the door when you knock, keep knocking.

Determination and persistence are fine most of the time, but sometimes just plain stubbornness and impatience are better.

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Proper 25  
Date: 25 October 1998  
Title: “Politics and the Reformed Church”  
Topic: Reformation Sunday  

Last year on Reformation Sunday, I commented on the agreement between the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Presbyterian Church for Full Communion. Last year was a landmark year for consolidation in the history of major Protestant denominations of the Reformed tradition.

So, what is new this year? Well, the dialogue continues, and all the denominations in Full Communion now call this particular Sunday not only Reformation Sunday, but also Reconciliation Sunday. Today, most Christians are in the reconciliation business. So, what about the Reformation thing?

This morning I would like to take us through a brief survey of the great reformers from Martin Luther in 16th century Germany to the present, and comment on their political as well as theological influence. Most historians recall the year 1517 as the beginning of the Reformation, when a brash, impetuous 34-year-old professor nailed a list of 95 gripes on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Three years later, in 1520, a popular Martin Luther burned an official Papal document ordering him to recant his views or be excommunicated. Truly, it was one of the great coincidences of all history that Martin did not wind up in the same condition as the burned document--as one more charcoal-broiled
heretic smoldering on the landscape. Why was Martin Luther not burned at the stake? Well, he had a great deal of political support.

Today, we know that politics and religion are inseparable. The same was true in Luther's day. Luther was backed by one of the more influential princes, Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, but the coin had two sides. Frederick liked Martin not because of Martin's theology, not because of Martin's beer drinking, not because of Martin's crudeness and coarseness, not because of his unrestrained, often vulgar, and tasteless attacks on the Pope, but because Martin was famous. Martin Luther appealed to the political sentiment of the people, and he appealed to the rising tide of German pride and nationalism. Those were the reasons, more than any other set of facts, for a Reformation in Germany associated with the name of Luther. After hundreds of years, all we have to do is sing the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," and Martin Luther still shakes the world.

Of course, a discussion of the Reformation would be only half a discussion without mentioning John Calvin, to whom all Reformed Christians, including Congregationalists, trace their origin. John Calvin, though a great doctor of the Church, and a great preacher, was not an ordained clergyman. Most of his energy was spent in working for broad reforms for the good of the city of Geneva, Switzerland. You name it, he worked on it: he helped plan the sanitary system; he worked on fire protection; he pushed for balcony railings above the ground floor to protect children in city housing, and introduced manufacturing to provide employment and strengthen the economy, which was unheard-of in the 16th century. His deepest concerns were centered in the areas of economics, politics, family life, and human relations. Most historians agree that Calvin's most important role as a reformer was NOT in theology but in economics, and they attribute to Calvin the rise of capitalism and the growth of the middle class. No serious student of government, economics or social theory, can avoid studying Calvin's sermons.

We could also take time to talk about John Knox in Scotland. John Knox, like Calvin, never sought ordination. Although he was a great doctor of the Church, a great teacher and preacher, and had a definite influence on the character of religious life in Scotland, John Knox was also the most important single influence in the life and political destiny of Scotland.

And there was John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in England. Wesley was a very complex person. Although he advised his ministers to stay out of politics, he did not practice what he preached. He openly opposed the slave trade, reached out to the unemployed, and although not an abstainer himself, so effectively preached against the consumption of alcohol that the brewers and distillers and grain dealers in England were furious.

Across the pond, a religiously motivated political revolution was taking place. We should mention Lyman Beecher, and his son Henry Ward Beecher, a very fine preacher, and Horace Bushnell, and Robert William Dale, and William Salter of Burlington, Iowa, and Washington Gladden, then Henry Sloan Coffin, and in this century, Reinhold Neibuhr.
In order to slow down here, and eventually to find some closure, I would like to mention that Neibuhr, during the first half of this century, criticized everything, and during a period of great idealism, stressed the sinfulness of humanity and all its systems: the state, the church, everything. All of it was sinful, and it was doomed. Neibuhr had a way of leaving his hearers confused and perplexed. While he was lecturing to a large crowd in England in 1924, William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, an ardent advocate of social reform and of international cooperation, who organized the interdenominational conference of Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship that same year, and was one of the church leaders to form the World Council of Churches, after listening to Neibuhr's lecture, penned a now-famous limerick:

At Swanwick, when Neibuhr had quit it,
Said a young man: "at last I have hit it.
Since I cannot do right, I must find out tonight,
The best sin to commit--and commit it."

Concerning the uneasy mixture of politics and religion, Neibuhr was a most controversial figure, and yet, probably each of us has admired one of his famous prayers, even though we did not know its source:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed.
Grant me the courage to change the things that ought to be changed.
Grant me the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

These simple lines, composed by the tormented modern reformer in a small country church near his summer home in Massachusetts, will probably be remembered longer than any of his sermons, which have never received much study.

Remember Norman Vincent Peale, and his power-of-positive-thinking theology? I have read nearly everything Dr. Peale wrote. Robert Schuller is still going strong, after adopting and expanding Peale's theology and renaming it "possibility thinking." Dr. Peale never dealt much with politics in the pulpit, but he was very active in the field of race relations, and openly advocated street demonstrations against discrimination. He once sent a burning telegram to President Johnson urging the protection for demonstrators in Selma Alabama.

And there was Harry Emerson Fosdick, and there still is William Franklin Graham--Billy Graham, who lost a lot of popularity when he opposed segregation in the 1950s. Graham openly endorsed the war on poverty in the 1960s. Read Graham's books and you will find a loaded pen with chapter titles such as, "Social Obligations of the Christians."

Where has all this gotten us? Perhaps it has not gotten us any further than today. Whatever our political leanings may be, our call as Christians is to demonstrate our faith. Our service to others is not outside of religion. Religion is the heart and the soul of it all.
God has called each of us to be involved in society, for surely, we who live in a free society know, deep down, inside, that when something goes wrong with the economy, with the politics, with the conscience of the nation, it is not that something is wrong with the economy or with the politics, or with the morals of other people, it is that something has gone wrong with us.

This Reformation/Reconciliation Sunday may God grant to each of us the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that ought to be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO SCRIPTURES

In the first lesson Joel describes the Day of the Lord and the promise of a new outpouring of divine spirit.

Psalm 65 is a hymn of thanksgiving and a song of the harvest feast in ancient Israel.

The second reading is the closing section in the readings from second Timothy. Paul is in peril. He has no signs of hope in this world, but he remains confident because of his trust in the Lord who is the foundation of his true hope.

The gospel lesson is the profound parable of the Pharisee and the publican, which examines the motives of prayer, and the nature and results of prayer. We learn here that all praying is not equally valid activity.

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Proper 26
All Saints
Date: 01 November 1998
Title: “All Saints”

This weekend is one of the most interesting to me in both religious and secular realms, or as one might put it in more archaic language, in the realms of both the sacred and the profane. Last night there was All Hallows Even, which for centuries has been abbreviated as Halloween. Today is All Saints Day, which is celebrated differently in modern times than it was in ancient Christian times, because today among Protestants and Roman Catholics alike, this day is used to remember all the faithful departed. The celebration has also been expanded during the past few decades to include all those who might be included under the general Protestant understanding of the term "saints," which includes all of the faithful, both living and dead.

Nevertheless, I am continually amazed--I am amused, yes, but also amazed with the intensity in which the dark side of humanity is celebrated in Nashua every Halloween. Halloween is almost a cult in Nashua, involving not only young children to whom Mary
and I always offer the greeting, "Happy Halloween," but also a great many high school students and adults who clearly have very strange, immature and borderline psychotic understandings about supernatural this and that, as if some of them lived in Haiti instead of the USA and practiced Voodoo instead of Christianity.

Some of you know that the house we Mowbrays call home in Nashua, where we have lived for seven years, was, since it was built in 1910 until we purchased it, the funeral home in the town. The first Halloween we lived there, no one came to the door for Halloween treats. NO ONE! Not one child rang the doorbell. We bought candy, we had the porch lights on, the house is smack in the middle of the town on a brightly lit corner, but no one rang the doorbell. That changed the following year, but during our first year of residency, no one visited on Halloween. Countless people asked us how we could live in such a place. (The fact was that three or four generations of the family that owned the funeral business had lived there very happily since 1910.)

I remember the day we moved in. One of our new neighbors was kind enough to help Mary move a number of kitchen things into our new home, but some of the stuff had no room in the kitchen yet, and was designated for temporary storage in the basement garage, but the otherwise helpful neighbor would not take anything into the basement.

On the ground floor, probably everyone in the town had been to a viewing in our three front rooms. “Was the house haunted,” some asked?

My reply became, "Well if it is, then the spirits must be very friendly."

"How can you sleep there at night," asked others? I actually began to rehearse my replies: "We all sleep very well, thank you. This is the most comfortable and friendly home my family has ever had, and it sure beats the heck out of any parsonage we ever lived in."

A man in the barbershop asked me one day if it bothered me that so many dead people had been in my house. I replied that dead people had never bothered me, but a great many living people had certainly been very annoying form time to time.

Be that as it may, during this time of year as shadows lengthen and the hours of daylight diminish, I think it is very natural to look inward toward our own thoughts about our mortality, as did the psalmist of old: “As for mortals, their days are like grass;” wrote the Psalmist, “they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who revere him....”

The connective word, "but," is the key word here, because the Psalmist's emphasis is not on the first part of this statement but on the second: "BUT the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting;" or as another translation has it, "But the kindness of the Lord is from eternity to eternity."

With these words the Psalmist offers thanksgiving for God's goodness. These are words
that shed light on even our darkest thoughts and darkest days.

In many places in North America this month begins with trees dressed in fiery reds and golds. It often ends with winter making its arrival clearly felt. The Church's calendar in this climate also reflects the "passing over" of autumn into winter. As November begins, we rejoice in God's harvest of the saints. We anticipate our homecoming in the New Jerusalem, where death will "pass over" into the fullness of life....

The longer and longer nights may remind us of death, the longest night of all. The failing sun may remind us of the Judgment Day, but not everything is gloom and doom at this season. Throughout the month of November and on through Advent we intertwine in our prayers the thanksgiving for the harvest, and the remembrance of our ancestors, and a deepening desire for our own homecoming in God's holy city.

That is what happens on the Church's calendar--on our calendar, the calendar of the baptized. But, of course, that is not what happens on the commercial calendar, which observes the final two months of the year as a shopping spree. Therefore, our households might want to take some time during November to decide which calendar takes precedence in our lives.

Personally, I am greatly amused with the commercial pattern in local stores, which has changed over the past several years to include only two of the previous three fall commercial sales promotions. There is no fall, autumn, seasonal commercial push any more; we, commercially, go directly from Halloween to Christmas. There is no longer any Thanksgiving in the commercial world. There is no Harvest celebration. This week in stores everywhere one could see the closeout of the Halloween junk and the massive stocking of shelves with the Christmas junk.

In spite of the commercial world, however, our tradition as Christians is to bless the deepening darkness of this season, and not to curse it. From now until Christmas, our tradition urges us to face the coming of winter, perhaps even to befriend it, and to, very deliberately, "hold off" on the lights and the tinsel of Christmas until the whole Church can sing together, "Christ is born."

Let us pray.

O God, Eternal Source of Wisdom, Power and Love, as the seasons change, lead us through all the changes and chances of our lives to rest our spirits upon those eternal foundations, which you have built for us, to pierce through the darkness with your light, and to pierce through the transient and superficial to that which abides. Save us, O God, from restlessness, haste, and confusion, from noise and perpetual movement. Lift our visions and our spirits that we may see the appeal of some task that will, in some way, reflect your greatness and your goodness, and feel the compulsion of your desires, and the power of your indwelling love. This we pray in the spirit of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE LESSONS
DANIEL 7:1-3, 15-18: The first lesson is an account of Daniel's vision of the four beasts who come up from the sea, which provides us with an interpretation of an historical crisis in which we sense God's struggle against evil.

Psalm 149 is a two-sided hymn of praise in which God's ability to destroy and to save is acknowledged.

EPHESIANS 1:11-23: The second lesson combines declarative lines concerning the spiritual blessings believers experience in Christ and a grand expression of thanksgiving that recognizes and celebrates God's saving power in Jesus Christ.

LUKE 6:20-31: The gospel lesson is Luke's version of the Beatitudes combined with a series of our Lord's explicit instructions about the goodness, graciousness, and generosity that are to characterize the life to which Jesus called his disciples.

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Proper 27
Date: 08 November 1998
Title: “Using Tradition”

In today's gospel lesson, we find Jesus being confronted by a group of traditionalists. He must have known what he was up against. Jesus, after all, was rather traditional. The gospels record that each Sabbath he worshipped at the synagogue, “as was his custom.” Joseph and Mary may have been proud of the fact that, after their son left home, he still worshipped every Sabbath. That a young adult continued to go to church every week in Jesus’ day would not have been any less unusual then, than it would be today.

As we age, we value tradition. We parents value tradition because we know that tradition can help us hand over knowledge, opinions, doctrines, customs, and practices from generation to generation in a way that just plain parenting cannot. We all inherit traditions from our ancestors, which can be passed on to future generations. Traditions are important.

During the time that I have been with you, I have told you about some of my family's traditions. We had a number of family gathering times that were traditional as long as there were enough family members available to be gathered at regular intervals. Many of my favorite childhood recollections are from the family gatherings on holidays.

There were also some ritual traditions among the men of the family: A hunting tradition in the fall, and a fishing tradition in the spring. Trout season was celebrated with a trip to open up Uncle John's cabin in upper New York State. There was a great deal of tradition to deal with as one fished for trout during trout season in upper New York State. No women attended, because the facilities and the fishermen were too crude. The cabin had a
wood-burning stove in the kitchen, and a large log-burning fireplace in the main room, but the bedrooms were unheated.

One year, when I was rather young, Uncle John changed part of the ritual by installing electricity in the cabin. There would be no more stinky kerosene lamps, and, as far as Uncle John was concerned, no more cold beds: He bought an electric blanket.

He told no one about his choice to depart from tradition. Therefore, the startling convenience of electricity came as quite a shock to the trout-fishing crowd. One chilly night, when the fires went out and the cabin became frigid, Uncle Willy, who was shivering in his old sleeping bag, noticed that Uncle John was sleeping very comfortably-too comfortably, thought Uncle Willy, so he reached out from his cold bed and unplugged Uncle John's electric blanket. The next day Uncle John complained all day long about how cold the weather was and how he had kept turning up the temperature on his new electric blanket all night, but still could not keep warm. Uncle John found the plug, unplugged, however, so he kept a careful vigil during the next night, because he knew for sure that Uncle Willy or someone else was bound to try to pull out that plug again.

Electricity changed things forever, and, from then on, the standard equipment for the annual trout fishing outing included not only a sleeping bag, but also an electric blanket.

Traditions are important. Family traditions are important. Most of all our faith traditions are important. We all inherit traditions from our ancestors that will be passed on to future generations. But traditions change.

The Bible reports that Jesus was very traditional in his worship. He worshipped every Sabbath, according to the New Testament, "as was his custom." But Jesus also had a great deal of trouble with people who were bound to tradition. The Sadducees were rigid traditionalists. Tradition is one thing. Traditionalism is another. A generation can certainly inherit the blessing and labors of another. But the people of one generation can be so zealous to transmit handed-down traditions, that they close their minds to new truth.

Surely we found this kind of a dilemma happening this past week. No one knew how this past election would turn out. No one knew who would turn out. When voters turned out in Minnesota, the body politic, as it is sometimes called, got a body slam. Traditional politics was thrown out of the ring.

The folk in Minnesota seem now to have three political parties: the GOP, the DFL, and the WWF. (Republicans, Democrats, and the World Wrestling Federation.) Isn't it amazing that the Reformed Party, established by wimpy, whiny Ross Perot, triumphed with the figure of Jessy "the body" Ventura? Even people like myself who cannot understand how something like that can happen, can understand that when tradition becomes so buttoned-down that people close their minds to new truth, anything can happen.
One day a group of traditionalists asked Jesus a theoretical question about a woman who was widowed seven times. Who would be her husband at the resurrection, asked the traditionalists, who did not believe in the idea of resurrection? Jesus replied, basically, "I don't know! And, who cares?"

You see, Jesus may have been a person who valued tradition, but he also knew that, because of his tradition, he knew who he was and he knew what God expected him to do, and he knew that he and his followers must seek God in the events of every day, and not in some indefinite future.

We must seek God in the events of today and every day, for there, and there only, are we tried and tested.

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Proper 28
Date: 15 November 1998
Title: “This Is It!”

In Paul's words to the Thessalonians, he tells them to stay away from idle people. He refers to the idle as busybodies--people who look busy, but who are achieving nothing. We know, of course, that there are also idle people who are motionless. But, I am certain that all of us here this morning have experienced the idleness of busybodies. In the Navy, in the ministry, in business, I have known a number of people who pretended to be busy, but who never achieved anything. They not only failed to achieve things that are worthwhile, they failed to achieve anything.

A number of career senior petty officers in the Navy, did nothing but walk around all day carrying a mug of coffee. We draftees found them to be a continuous source of annoyance, but also a source of amusement. We used to joke about a deformity we called “Chief Petty Officer Thumb,” which was caused by the way the Chiefs carried their coffee mugs with their thumbs hooked over the lip of the mug. There were career officers who did the same thing. What busybodies! But they never achieved anything.

As a full-time pastor, I have observed church secretaries who always looked busy, who talked and fussied and messed around all day, but who never seemed to achieve anything. I have worked with other clergy who attended workshop after workshop, and seminar after seminar, but who never achieved anything. If the Great Day of the Lord had come, I don't think any of them would have noticed--they would have been too busy.

From my Organist and Choirmaster days, I recall an Episcopal tale about a young curate who just joined the staff of a large cathedral. Within a few weeks of his arrival, he was asked by the bishop to preach on a given Sunday that was only two weeks away. The curate, fresh out of seminary, was extremely nervous, but worked diligently on his
message. Soon, the time had come. This was it. The worship service began with the usual Episcopal pomp—a grand procession: first the crucifer, then the torch bearers, then the choir, then another crucifer, then two more torch bearers, then the curate and other cathedral staff, then the dean of the cathedral, then the bishop in all his finery. Everything proceeded at the usual, slow, cathedral pace, with great ceremony. Following the gospel reading, during the sermon hymn, the crucifer and torchbearers made their way to where the curate was seated, and escorted him to the pulpit, as if he were a bishop. He was very excited as he climbed the curving steps up into the massive, carved marble pulpit. When the hymn ended, he crossed himself, and was ready to begin preaching. He looked at his notes, then looked down the long nave of the cathedral, and took and deep breath. But, before he could utter his first word, he noticed Jesus sitting in the first row.

The Lord, was seated in the first row! (pause) What should he do? He had no idea what to do. So, he ran down the pulpit steps. The sub-dean was the closest staff person, so he whispered into the sub-dean's ear, "The Lord is seated in the front row, what should I do?"

"I don't know," replied, the sub-dean, "ask the dean."

The curate ran over to the dean of the cathedral and whispered into his ear, "The Lord is seated in the front row, what should I do?"

The dean replied, "I don't know. Ask the bishop."

So the curate dashes over to the bishop, and, audibly asks the bishop, "The Lord is seated in the front row, what should I do?"

The bishop replied, "LOOK BUSY!"

Some of the busiest-looking people I have known, have been nothing more than busybodies: idle people, moving around a lot, talking constantly, achieving nothing.

There will be times in our lives when we will need to have achieved much. This point leads us to the underlying message we find in the gospel lesson for today where Jesus talks about the Day of the Lord and the Age to Come. I am not going to use today's lesson in particular, but rather refer to it as one of many in which Jesus talks about the end of the present age, and the Age to Come.

This was Jewish talk about time. The Jews of Jesus’ time talked about time in two ages: the Present Age, with its struggle against evil, and the Age to Come, which was foreseen with hope as a Golden Age of God. In between these two times, there would be a Day of the Lord. The early Christian church attached the Jewish idea of the Day of the Lord to the Second Coming of Christ. Therefore, as we read the New Testament we find a great deal about being ready: "The time is at hand," reads an older translation. "The time is near." "The time has come," are other translations. A modern paraphrase might be, "This is it!"
These words of warning are not for idle people. What time is it? "It's late," says Jesus. It's not Howdy Doody Time. It's late. THIS IS IT.

There are so many things in life for which we try to prepare ourselves so that when the time comes, we are ready.

During my first two years after college, before I was drafted, I played a number of organ recitals on the east coast. I practiced and practiced, and worked my head off as the recital date approached, and then finally, at the appointed hour, I had to say to myself, "this is it." There is no more time to practice. This is it!

I recall the Lamaze classes Mary and I attended to prepare both of us for the birth of our son. Every week, for countless months, we went to class and learned everything expectant parents needed to know about birth. Everything anyone ever needed to know about the birth of a child was covered in that class. Then one night, about four in the morning, Mary woke me and said, "This is it."

"What? Let's time the contractions and wait and see," I replied, still half asleep, because we had gone through this a couple of times before.

"NO," she yelled, "I've already timed the contractions, and THIS IS IT."

More times than I would like to remember I have suffered along with family members in an intensive care unit as they prayerfully tried to decide when to shut off the life support system, according to their loved one's directions in a living will.

Sometimes we can spend a great deal of time preparing ourselves for events, and, no matter what we do, we still fall short of being really prepared. The important thing is, of course, that we try--that we are busy doing something in the way of preparation, and not just being busybodies.

The mission of the Church of Jesus Christ is never finished. Since Jesus’ day, many cities and nations have been destroyed, and many earthquakes have caused horrendous suffering. And we should note that by the time the New Testament books were being collected, the temple in Jerusalem had already been destroyed in A.D. 70, and the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 73 had already destroyed Pompeii. There was famine and pestilence everywhere as the Roman Empire came apart at the seams, and believers, such as the gospel writers, saw great signs of terror, as early Christian martyrs were being tortured and killed. But some remembered the teachings of Jesus without adding their glosses, and they realized that sometimes it is not good enough to think things through. As Jesus said, wars happen. Earthquakes happen. Tornados happen. Hurricanes happen. Violent winter storms happen. But, these things have nothing whatever to do with God's future. So keep on loving God unconditionally, and your neighbor as yourself, and always be ready, because, THIS IS IT.